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Vol. XIII. \$2.50
a Year.

Published Weekly by Beadle and Adams,
No. 93 WILLIAM ST., NEW YORK.

Price,
Five Cents. No. 161.



THE SOUND OF HIS BLOWS WAS HEARD, AS THEY FELL IN RAPID SUCCESSION ON THE DOOR.

Bob Rockett, THE CRACKSMAN;

OR,

DRIVEN TO THE WALL.

BY CHARLES MORRIS,

AUTHOR OF "BOB ROCKETT, THE BANK RUNNER,"
"BOB ROCKETT, THE BOY DODGER,"
"WILL WILDFIRE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

ON THE TRACK OF AN ADVENTURE.

"HEY, landlord! Waiter! Somebody! Whoever has charge of this shanty!"

The loud, hoarse voice in which this call was uttered brought both landlord and waiter of the Frontier Hotel, of Little Rock, Arkansas. They ran anxiously up to their impatient guest.

"Yes, sir! What is it, sir? Are you wanting anything, sir?"

The traveler looked up with something quizzical under the stern look of his face.

"What do you call this decoction?" And he pointed to the steaming cup before him.

"That, sir? That's coffee, sir!"

"Coffee, is it?" in a cynical tone. "Then bring me tea. If you're making a mistake, and it's tea, then bring me coffee."

The waiter backed off, as if he thought that the guest must, at least, be a lunatic.

"Excuse me, sir," replied the landlord, angrily. "But we buy that for the best Java."

"Do you? Then it's a shame that you're so confoundedly sold. And what's this? Beef or mutton?"

"Beef or mutton!" the landlord sniffed with contempt. "That's venison steak, sir. Fresh venison, sir. The deer that steak came from was on his hoofs yesterday."

"I wish to Jericho, then, he was on his hoofs to-day, so that I would not have to do penance over his tough old steaks."

With a look of disgust the traveler made another effort to cut a morsel from the leathery meat.

He was a young man of a short, stout frame, with a face that no one would call good-looking. But there was in his expression something firm and resolute, and, it must be confessed, certain traces of dissipation. He was well and fashionably dressed, and sported a gold watch-chain of vast dimensions, while the glitter of a diamond ring shone on one of his fingers.

"Oh! take this away!" he cried. "If you're going to feed me on Arkansas venison of the last century, just give me warning, so I can emigrate."

A clear, silvery laugh came from the table adjoining that at which the irate traveler was seated. He turned quickly, and started with surprise at the vision which met his eyes.

For he beheld a face of unusual beauty. A soft, warm complexion, gleaming black eyes, and features of perfect mold met his gaze, forming a face that had a voluptuous fullness in its rich beauty. The young lady was dressed in a light-

colored silk, with a broad lace collar about her throat. She was as graceful in form as attractive in face.

"Excuse me," she remarked, still merrily laughing. "I could not help it. Evidently you are a stranger to Little Rock. Try prairie chicken, sir, I think you will like it."

"Thank you," replied the gentleman with a polite bow. "Do you hear, waiter? Exchange this deer meat for a roast prairie chicken."

The landlord and his satellite disappeared, leaving the traveler *vis-a-vis* with the young lady, who sat alone at the table, nonchalantly sipping her coffee.

He did not feel disposed to let the conversation fall.

"I am a stranger in this region, I admit," he remarked. "But I am certainly fortunate in finding such a—"

"Now, no compliments!" she laughingly interrupted. "You are stirring your brain to get out some fine speech. Don't do it, unless you want to see me vanish through the door or window. I have been dosed to death with compliments."

"Mercy! how can people help it?" he exclaimed. "When one sees beauty, grace—"

"I see. You are as bad as all the rest," she cried, rising. "I shall have to bid you good-day."

"But you will not let me finish," he quizzically answered. "When one sees beauty and grace so strangely wanting, when one sees so homely a face, such plain features, such a lack of grace, such—"

The young lady had heard his first words with a look of amazement, mingled with spite. Then a smile curled her full lips. Finally she ran quickly toward him, and stopped his speech by clapping her small hand upon his mouth.

"That is worse than the other!" she cried.

"Such impudence I never heard! I wager high that you are from New York."

He laughed as she withdrew her hand.

"What makes you think that?"

"I know the brand," she replied. "There is a peculiar assurance about your average New Yorker that it would be hard to find elsewhere. Besides I am from New York myself."

"I thought so."

She looked at him, and burst into her merry laugh.

"I see. You think I have a touch of the average New York assurance. Good-day, sir. I hope you will enjoy your meal."

"But, one moment," he entreated. "I may stay some time in Little Rock, and should be glad to see you again. It will not be a new specimen of assurance to ask permission to call upon you?"

She hesitated for a moment, with a slight change of color.

"Why, if you wish. Here is my card."

He looked at it with interest. It was a dainty, scented, amber-tinted card, bearing on it the name "Marie Delorme," and the street and number of an address in Little Rock.

"Thanks," he rejoined. "Here is mine in return. I shall be glad to call on you."

She cast her eyes rather superciliously upon the card which he had given her. It bore the

name of "Robert Rockett, New York." She dropped it lightly into her pocket, and walked easily from the room.

"Well," he said to himself, "I've heard something of free and easy ways in the West, but this bangs Bannager! And how in the world did a woman with that face ever drift from New York out to this benighted region? There may be some devilry at the bottom of this. But Bob Rockett isn't the man to go back on an adventure with a pretty face at the other end of it. I am going through it, no matter if there's fire and brimstone in it."

While he was finishing his dinner and making some futile inquiries of the hotel people about his late neighbor, the latter had reached a house on one of the side streets of the city, and was comfortably seated in a neatly-furnished room, fronting a handsome, well-formed and well-dressed gentleman.

"Luck? Yes, prime luck," she laughed. "I've flung my net, and caught a fish at the first throw. I don't often fail, George, you know that."

"Who is it? Not a commercial traveler, I hope, like the last."

"He is a New Yorker to begin with. Aristocratic in dress, though a little loud. Wears a real diamond, and a gold chain that would hang an ox. I've a fancy that the man has a full purse."

"And will he bite?"

"Don't they all bite? Look at my face, George Delorme. Am I not beautiful, charming? What woman can be more agreeable than I, if I choose? Do not imagine that any of these young gudgeons can escape you, so long as you use me for bait."

"You are beautiful, Marie," he said, kissing her pouting lips. "What have I not done for your beauty? Think of all that I have given up for the love of you."

"You do not regret it?" She fixed her deep black eyes on him with a burning glance.

"Regret it, my siren! No, never. I am yours, body and soul, and you know it."

She laughed lightly, as she fixed her eyes upon him with a fascinating look, while her fingers played with the curls of his brown hair.

"Let bygones be bygones, George. We have both stepped into the paths of crime—I to win you, and you to win me. I fancy that neither of us repents of our bargain. But, love is not money."

"And we must fleece this young stranger?"

"Precisely."

"And afterward?"

"This town may grow too hot to hold us."

"I know what is in your mind, Marie. In New York, at the house of old Garland, the banker, there is a stake waiting for us which may save us from the trouble of meddling in these small affairs."

"And revenge for me on my rich cousin, Grace Garland."

There was something tigerish in her face, and the clutching bend of her fingers, as she hissed out these words. If Bob Rockett had seen her then, he might have changed his mind about visiting this Little Rock beauty.

Yet the evening was not old when he found

himself opposite the door of the house to which her card directed him. He paused for a minute before ringing.

"I may get myself into trouble," he soliloquized. "This following fine faces into strange houses, in these frontier cities, may be risky. The whole thing looks to me like a game of some sort. But, no matter! I am not the man to back down on the track of an adventure. And I fancy they may find me as hard to manage as I found my host's tough venison steak. Here goes for it."

His ring was answered by Marie Delorme herself.

"Mr. Rockett!" she cried, with affected surprise. "I declare I did not expect you would come in response to my joking invitation. But come in, sir. I am glad you called."

Her invitation was so warmly given that shrewd Bob Rockett felt rather inclined to retreat than to accept it. After a moment's hesitation, however, he entered, saying:

"A joking invitation, Miss Delorme? I hope not. I flattered myself that I would be really welcome."

"So you are, sir. Good company is not over-plentiful out in this wild West. This way, sir. Let me have your hat."

She ushered him into a neatly-furnished sitting-room. Here, much to his surprise, he saw a tall, well-dressed, handsome gentleman, in whose face, at first sight, Bob recognized something familiar. But it was one of those undefined recognitions, which simply puzzle without giving any safe clew to the person.

This gentleman rose on their entrance, and was introduced by the lady as "my cousin, George Anderson."

Bob bowed politely, though saying to himself. "Plague take your cousin, George Anderson. It was you I came here to see, not your cousin."

There was no help for it, however. He seated himself, and they were soon engaged in a lively conversation, George Delorme, *alias* Anderson, doing his best to make himself agreeable.

An hour passed in conversation, at the end of which his gentleman host proposed a quiet game of cards.

"Just for pastime, you know."

"Oh, that's like you, George," cried Marie poutingly. "Always wanting cards."

"But one can't talk on forever. And I have a fancy that Mr. Rockett will not object to a game."

"Not I," answered Bob.

"What shall it be? Brag or poker?"

"Ah!" said Bob to himself. "Highly respectable games those. The curtain is rising."

"It is all one to me," he answered.

"Brag let it be then. And a dollar stake say. No one can lose much then, and that will make it interesting."

"The deuce they can't!" said Bob inwardly, with a mental grimace. "Why a fellow could be fleeced in the twinkling of a tallow candle. But all right, I am in for an adventure."

"I am your man," he replied aloud. "I don't know much about the game, but you can post me as we go on. Does Miss Delorme play?"

"Of course," she answered. "I have no

fancy to let you two have all the fun to yourselves."

In a few minutes more the three were seated around a table, cards were produced, and they were ready to enter into a match of the classic game of brag. Bob watched his antagonists closely, but saw nothing in them indicating any intention to play unfairly.

CHAPTER II.

A GOOD FAIR ROYAL.

WE must digress for a short time from the affairs of Bob Rockett to pay a visit to New York. Those of our readers who have read the preceding history of this young gentleman, will remember the sudden breaking off of the wedding of Grace Garland, through the discovery that her former husband was still living.

There was but one conclusion. Either he was dead, and the letter threatening a visit from him was a forgery; or he was living and was a villain. Her grief at his loss had long since yielded to newer interests, and particularly to her love for Paul Essex. If George Delorme had really passed away, she could but feel a sense of regret for his loss. If he really lived, she could but despise him!

As for her new lover, Paul Essex, his feeling was deeper. It is no light matter to have a beautiful bride torn from you at the altar, through the claim of one who had long forgotten or neglected his right.

Paul waited with anger, Grace with dread and despair, the passing of the thirty days' probation. They passed, yet George Delorme did not appear.

"The letter is evidently a forgery," insisted Paul. "Some enemy of yourself or your father has done this. Or it may be an enemy of mine. Perhaps Bob Rockett."

"No, no," asserted Grace. "It was not he!"

"And why not?"

"Because I do not believe that he is so vile. And I know he would do nothing to injure me. Besides, that handwriting! It is undoubtedly George Delorme's. I cannot be mistaken."

"You do not know how shrewd forgeries may be made. If it was he, the thirty days are over. Why is he not here?"

"I cannot tell you that," she sadly replied.

"I can then. He is not living. Some enemy has done this. There is no reason why we should not get married, and so defeat this subtle foe."

His ardent eyes looked with a warm love-light into hers. His hand clasped her slender fingers. She shook with emotion as she withdrew her hand from his grasp.

"No, no, Paul! There are too dreadful chances! He may be alive. He may return. We dare not take a risk that might prove criminal." Her soft eyes, full of longing, were suffused with tears as she spoke.

"But when is this probation to be over? How long must we wait?"

"I cannot tell," despairingly. "For months. For years, perhaps. I must know the truth first."

"I will not wait!" He rose with sudden resolu-

tion. "The truth may be discovered. He died at Nashville, they say. Then to Nashville I will go. I may be able to ferret out this dark secret. Wish me well on the journey, Grace, for it is in search of our lost happiness that I go."

"My love and hope go with you, Paul."

With a kiss on his lips, and hope in his heart, Paul Essex took the westward bound train, determined to not return until he had solved this mystery which surrounded the fate of his rival, and had either unearthed a villain, or found the grave of the dead.

That George Delorme was living we need not tell the reader. For we left him but lately, dealing the cards for a game of brag to Bob Rockett, and Marie Ormiston that was, Marie Delorme as she now called herself.

"Ace of hearts!" cried Bob, looking at his turned up card. "The first stake is mine."

"Right," answered George, "and now for the brag. It's your first put."

"A half eagle on mine."

"Is that your best?" laughed Marie. "Why, even little I am bold enough to double that."

"And my hand is worth a twenty," remarked George, with an indifferent air.

Bob looked again at his cards. Were his antagonists intending to play fair, or was there some scheme behind their display of fair dealing? There was one way to find out.

"I call your bet," he said.

"And you?" to Marie.

"Not I," she cried, with her silvery laugh. "You are too bold, you two great men, for poor little me. I withdraw from the fight."

Bob laughed.

"I gave you credit for more courage," he answered. "It is my call. Show your hand, Mr. Anderson."

"A pair of aces," said George.

"A pair royal of eights," answered Bob. "I rake the pool."

It was Marie's turn to laugh.

"He accuses me of want of courage," she cried, merrily, "and yet he stops at a call on a sure hand. Why, if I had held such cards I would have bragged the bets up to a hundred."

"We New Yorkers are not good on the brag," answered Bob.

She dropped her cards and lay back in her chair to laugh, as if she had never heard anything quite so amusing. They all became infected with her merriment, and the game went on for some time in a very lively fashion, though without much loss or gain on any side.

"Good! There's a hand!" cried George. "I'll brag a cool hundred on that."

"Two hundred," chimed in Marie, as she looked at her cards.

"Three hundred," said Bob, coolly.

The betting went on in the same lively fashion. The stakes and bets made a heap of over fifteen hundred dollars on the table, for each better had planked up the full amount of the bets.

George Delorme eyed Bob with a peculiar look. Marie was no longer in a laughing mood. Her face had grown set and stern. Her black

eyes fixed themselves keenly upon the face of their young antagonist.

"On what do you call?" asked George, his right hand dropped below the level of the table.

Bob threw down his cards. His hand consisted of the jack of clubs and two queens.

"A pair royal of queens," he announced.

"It is not good," rejoined Marie, flinging down her cards face upward. "I hold a pair royal of kings."

"And I of aces," broke in George.

Bob looked at the hands in surprise. There was only a pair in each hand, the third card being a low spot card.

"I see no pair royal," he returned. "Where is the mate to your pairs?"

A hard light came into Marie's eyes.

"Here is my king," she replied.

Bob stared as he saw her lay a small revolver on the table, beside the pair of kings.

"And here is my ace."

George laid a large seven-chambered revolver beside his hand.

Bob whistled.

"What does your hand say, my game youth?" asked George, keeping his hand on the stock of the pistol. "If you can outbrag that hand the game is open."

"Or this," said Marie, lifting the neat, silver-mounted weapon, and bringing its sights to bear upon Bob's breast-button.

A grimace passed over the young man's face. Here was the adventure he had been seeking. He was decidedly in a trap. But he was too cool a hand to show the white feather.

He half rose from his chair, and leaned forward over the table, as if for a closer look at his antagonists' hands. There was a touch of humor in his expression.

"I own up the corn," he coolly remarked to George, who eyed him closely. "Rake down the pool. Your pair royal is good. My poor little queens are nowhere before three such aces."

Marie laughed, but with none of the silvery ring of her former merriment. There was, to Bob, something cat-like in her present laughter.

"I see that you have good eyesight," she satirically remarked. "It isn't every one can see the point of that little joke so quickly."

"Why, I admire your way of playing brag," answered Bob, in his cool manner. "You've got such a good idea of filling out a blank hand. It is your deal, Miss Delorme. Don't let us stop playing yet. I want my revenge."

The two confederates stared now in good earnest. Was the fellow an idiot? Or was he anxious to be fleeced?

"Come, the cards are getting cold."

Marie mechanically picked up and shuffled the pack, laying down her pistol before her on the table.

The hands were dealt around to the three players, three cards to each, the last card being faced upward as usual.

"Ace of diamonds!" cried Bob. "That robs the first stake. Who brags?"

His two antagonists passed. They seemed at a loss what to make of his behavior.

"My hand brags a ten," announced Bob.

George Delorme looked at him keenly for an

instant, as if to discover what hidden thought was playing in his mind. Then a cold smile curled the gambler's lips, as he laid his pistol on the table before him, and picked up his cards. He seemed as if saying to himself: "If the fool will, why let him. He wants badly to get rid of his loose cash."

"My hand brags twenty," he said.

"Forty," cried Bob, flinging down the money with a reckless air.

Marie seemed for the time stupefied at this unexpected behavior of their victim. She now came into the game.

"Sixty," she exclaimed.

"A hundred," announced Bob.

"Two hundred," chimed in George, pushing up a part of his former winnings.

The brag went on, until more money than before lay upon the table, the whole of Bob's previous six hundred being returned, together with a goodly pile of the funds of his antagonists.

Bob eyed the money with a keen gaze. Some odd idea seemed passing through his mind, to judge by the grim smile that passed over his face.

Marie appeared nervous and alarmed.

"Won't one of you call?" she asked anxiously.

"There is no use to keep up this brag all night."

Bob looked again at the pool. All his own money was returned to the table.

"I call," he said.

"A pair of sevens," announced Marie. "I am out of the game. It is between you two."

"A pair royal of Kings," cried George, throwing his three kings face upward on the table.

"Not good," answered Bob coolly.

"The deuce it isn't! What have you got to beat it?"

"Three aces," rejoined Bob, loosening himself in his chair, as he displayed his cards.

His antagonists looked at them with astonishment. They consisted of the ace of diamonds, the queen of clubs and the seven of spades.

"Where are your three aces?" asked George.

"Here," answered Bob, pushing the cards toward them, with a finger on each card. He leaned over the table as he did so. The next instant he had risen from his chair, flung himself half across the wide table, and grasped the pistols which lay before his astounded antagonists. He had gained his object, of distracting their attention for the moment from the weapons.

"Here are my three aces," exclaimed Bob, pushing out the ace of diamonds, and holding the pistols beside it. "Is the hand good?"

It was an interesting tableau at that moment. Bob stood upright on his side of the table, leveling a pistol at arm's length at each of his antagonists, while the cynical smile upon his face was belied by the keen glance of his eyes.

As for the confederate gamblers, they were crouched back in their chairs, their faces pale with fear of the stranger who had so cutely turned the tables upon them.

"You give in, then? My brag wins? Come, I want your honest opinion."

"Take the cash, and get away from here, while your skin's whole!" cried George in a rage.

"Thank you, but I am in no such hurry. Sit still there, now! Take my advice. I suppose I don't need to tell you that these pistols are loaded, and might go off if anything made me nervous. But I won't rob you of all the money. I could not think of serving the pretty Miss Delorme so cruelly."

The smile still marked Bob's face as he laid one of the weapons on the table, and sorted out the heap of bank notes with the skill of an old bank officer. The scared gamblers noticed that he had taken only his own money from the mass, leaving them the amount of their own bets.

"There, that is all I care for," he cynically remarked. "I will leave you the balance. I never like to quite fleece my antagonists in a friendly game."

"You had better take it all, since you fancy you have won it," said Marie angrily.

"Thank you. But I would not know just what to do with that money. I will take a five for sample, but I do not care to fill my pockets with such a heap of forged paper. It is not so easy to get rid of counterfeit money."

The faces of the exposed confederates grew full of consternation.

"I thought I knew you at first sight," continued Bob. "I am sure now. Good-by, Mr. George Delorme! We may meet again."

He walked from the room, facing them till he had passed the door.

CHAPTER III.

THE STEAMBOAT RACE.

THE good steamer, Great Western, moved rapidly up the broad flood of the noble Mississippi. Her decks were well filled with passengers, who enjoyed the bright sunlight of the April day, as they looked out over the full flood and the thickly-wooded banks of the mighty stream, and watched with interest the occasional craft that passed them, bound downward.

Nothing that was bound upward could easily have passed that swift steamer, though a rival craft, that lay nearer the western shore, was strenuously seeking to do so. The two steamers, in fact, were racing, and every soul on board each was as eagerly excited about the result as if he was part owner of the vessel, or had laid a heavy wager on the craft which he honored with his presence.

Among the passengers of the Great Western was Paul Essex. But he was not the disconsolate lover who had left New York shortly before with the hope of solving an unpleasant mystery. On the contrary, he now seemed happy, his face being radiant with pleasure, his whole person instinct with hope.

With the lively spirit of youth he took a deep interest in the race between the two steamers.

The great walking-beams of the rival boats plunged up and down with startling rapidity. The water curled and seethed under their sharp prows. Engineers and firemen alike were wild with excitement as they pushed the powers of each boat to its utmost.

"Good for our side!" cried an enthusiastic Westerner, throwing up his hat. "We beat them roundly at that turn."

"That was because we had the short leg of the bend," replied a short, stout, well-dressed person.

"There's no use talking, gentlemen. I want to see our boat win, but between you and me she hasn't the backbone. The Occident has gained fifty feet in the last mile."

"Oh! that's all confounded fudge! It ain't in her boots to beat this stinger!"

"Maybe not. They that live longest will see the most."

"See here, stranger; you're a gay coon, to go back on your own choice of a boat. Why in the blazes didn't you take passage in the Occident, being's you swear by her?"

"That's my business," answered the other briefly. "I ain't the man to say anything that I'm afraid to back with the cash. I'll lay a cool hundred that she leads us in the next two miles, or that she lays us out stiff inside of five miles."

"Oh! go way, man!" retorted the Westerner. "I'm a church member, or I'd take you up."

"A square back-down. Just as I expected," replied the other, turning away with contempt.

Paul Essex had heard this conversation. His young blood boiled. Was the honor of the noble craft he trod to be bluffed in that style? He had never made a bet in his life, and was conscientiously opposed to it; but this was a little too much for his principles.

"I will take that bet," he cried, stepping quickly forward.

"You're my meat," replied the other turning. "And I'll build it up to five hundred if you're agreeable."

He suddenly stopped, and started slightly backward. Paul started still more violently. They had recognized each other at the same instant. The two old foes stood face to face, Paul Essex and Bob Rockett!

For a minute they stood, gazing, or rather glaring at each other, while the spectators who had gathered at the prospect of a bet, stared in surprise.

"Bob Rockett!"

"Paul Essex!"

"Thief and villain! I have found you then!"

"Liar! Dare to say that again and I will serve you the same sauce I treated you to ten years ago."

"You are not the man to do it," and Paul drew up his tall form, and glared defiance upon his foe.

"We will see that, my crowing banty. Look to yourself!"

The next instant Bob had him by the shoulders and was shaking him as a cat shakes a mouse. Then, with a fierce surge, he flung him backward. Paul would have fallen headlong to the deck but that he came into sharp contact with the Westerner, who went down like a shot.

Evidently the young man was no match in strength with his stout-built antagonist, but he was game to the backbone, and in an instant faced him again, with clinched fists and gleaming eyes.

"Get out, now!" growled Bob, "I don't want to do you a harm; but by all that's good, if you come ruffling around here, I'll teach you a lesson that you won't forget in a cock's crow!"

"Bully! as you always were; I don't fear you!"

Paul struck a sharp blow at Bob's face, which

the latter easily parried. Several hard blows passed without effect. They were both trained in the art of self-defense, and easily parried each other's blows.

"The fiends take you! What's up here?" came a harsh voice, as a burly figure broke through the ring that surrounded the combatants. "Hang it all, gentlemen, I don't want to interfere with your amusements; but you're not ashore now, and I'm captain of the Great Western. So this mill's got to lay off."

He pushed his burly form between the fighters with utter heedlessness of the blows which he might receive in doing so, and forced them asunder with a double sweep of a pair of the strongest arms on the Mississippi.

"Fun's fun," he growled. "Haven't I got you up amusement enough in the race, but you must be clawing at one another's faces, like a pair of Kilkenny cats? What's adrift, anyhow?"

"This here chap's wantin' to bet on the Occident, that's all," remarked the Westerner.

"The fiends you say! Why, I'll take a fist in that game myself, with anybody that wants it. Thank you for upholding the honor of the Great Western."

He seized Paul's hand with a warm energy that made that young gentleman wince.

All eyes were turned angrily on Bob. Men had been lynched for a less crime. Yet he bore it all with a cynical sneer as if he cared not a whit for their anger.

"Excuse me, captain," answered Paul earnestly. "But that is not the trouble. This man is a fugitive from justice. He is a bank robber, and is wanted by the police of New York."

The indignation against Bob increased at this new charge.

"Thunder!" cried the captain. "That's a different affair. So, my cock robin, that's what's in the wind, eh? A bank robber! That's a serious business, gentlemen. We shall have to lock this man up, and hand him over to justice."

Bob's Hoosier antagonist and several others advanced with intent to arrest him. He stood immobile, with the same cynical sneer on his face.

"Stand back, friends," he said. "It is not far to the side of the boat, and some of you might get flung overboard. As for this young rooster, who is so full of his charges, where is his warrant? It is easy to call any man a thief, but I'd like to see him prove it."

The lookers-on grew rather dubious at the coolness of the accused man.

"He was concerned in the robbery of the Provident Bank of New York," Paul hotly exclaimed.

"Aha! and maybe you will tell these gentlemen how long you were in prison for that same robbery?"

Paul stammered a confused answer.

"It was a false charge!" he cried. "I was only locked up for trial. My innocence was discovered, and I was released without a trial."

"Very fine, that." Bob was coolness itself. "Would you like to know the real secret of his being let out, gentlemen?"

"Yes, yes," came several voices.

"It was because he was engaged to be married to the daughter of the bank president. The affair was hushed up to save the disgrace of it."

The captain of the steamer looked doubtfully from one to the other.

"Is that so?" he asked Paul, whose ingenuous face was suffused with a deep flush.

"It is a rascally lie!" he indignantly cried.

"Is it?" continued Bob, sarcastically. "And is it a lie that you stood up to marry this young lady, and that an honest gentleman took the opportunity to denounce the whole proceeding, and to prove that the innocent bride was about to commit bigamy; that she had a husband still living? Is *that* a lie?"

Bob faced his foe with a look of sarcastic defiance.

"Yes;" Paul exclaimed "that, too, is a lie. The letter was a forgery, which, I doubt not, you had some hand in. I have just been to Nashville for proof of this charge, and I found there abundant evidence that George Delorme died of yellow fever five years ago. So that scheme, too, falls to the ground, with the others."

A considerable crowd had gathered by this time, all listening with anxious interest to the mystery partly revealed in the words of the speakers.

Bob stared at Paul, a low whistle escaping his lips.

"You found *evidence* of his death?"

"Yes, of the soundest kind."

"Your evidence is not worth that!" and Bob snapped his fingers disdainfully.

"Why is it not?"

"Because I cleaned out George Delorme in a game of brag, not ten days ago; and he was the liveliest-looking dead man anybody ever set eyes on."

Paul grew slightly pale at this declaration. He then turned away with a look of incredulity. He evidently thought it merely intended to annoy him.

The controversy suddenly ended.

"The Occident has caught up to us!" cried a loud voice on the skirts of the crowd. "She is forging ahead! Stir yourself up, Captain Brown, and let those two roosters fight out their own set-to. Don't let the Great Western be disgraced."

One quick bound took the captain through the mass. He ran hastily toward the pilot-house, while the passengers crowded again to the side of the boat, forgetting the late dispute in their new interest in the race.

It was no false alarm. The rival boat was evidently gaining.

One look, and the captain darted below to the boiler-room.

"Shove her up, Mr. Smith! You are getting no speed out of her! Why, she's creeping along like a baby! Pile in the fuel! Don't spare it! I'll sell out if that tub creeps ahead of us!"

"We are doing our best," replied the engineer. "There's ninety pounds of steam on her now. She won't bear over one hundred."

"She must and *shall* stand it!" roared the captain. "If wood won't give you steam, fling a tar barrel or two into the furnace. There is a consignment of hams down in the hold. That's

the stuff for steam. I will get some of them up."

He ran hastily to the deck, and soon had the deck-hands passing a line of hams down to the boiler room.

Soon heavier volumes of smoke poured from the funnel. The engine clanked with new speed. The water gurgled more furiously around the boat. A shout of exultation arose from the passengers as the Great Western again lapped her rival, and slowly drew ahead of her. Ten minutes passed. They had gained a full length.

The engineer came up and whispered something to the captain.

"She must carry it," he fiercely replied. "Pile in the hams. Run her up to 140."

"Is there any danger, captain?" asked an anxious old lady who stood near him.

"Danger! Of course, there's always danger. But we are going to beat that boat if we travel to kingdom come in doing it."

He was interrupted by a terrible sound, a crash like that of the loudest thunder. The decks seemed to lift as the earth lifts in an earthquake. For an instant the whole boat seemed raised from the water. Simultaneously there came a rending, crashing noise, a huge mass of iron leaped through the bursted deck, and from every opening volumes of scalding steam poured out upon the terror-stricken passengers.

The race was ended! The boilers of the Great Western had exploded!

CHAPTER IV.

FROM THE DECK TO THE WAVE.

ONE moment's dread silence followed the terrible crash from the deep heart of the Great Western, and then the shrill hiss of the outrushing steam, the despairing yells of men and screams of women, made the air vibrate with still more terrible sounds.

It was indeed a dreadful scene. The scalding steam gushed in a volume of white mist from every crevice in the shattered deck, while bleeding forms lay here and there on the deck, slain by the hurtling fragment of the rent boilers, and others ran wildly to and fro in agony, fatally scalded by the escaping steam.

Dozens had sprung overboard at the first shock. Hundreds ran to the bow and stern of the boat, in a wild effort to escape the scalding mist, which followed them in their flight.

And now came still more dread cries: "The boat is sinking!" "Save yourselves; the boat is on fire!"

Hastily grasping every available means of support, the despairing passengers leaped wildly into the cold and swift-flowing current, preferring to trust to the treacherous bosom of the stream, rather than remain on the deadly volcano of the boat.

The Occident had instantly checked her speed on hearing the thunder-like crash from her rival, and seeing the torrent of flame and steam that shot upward into the air.

She was now steaming rapidly across the stream toward her disabled competitor, while busy hands were rapidly preparing her boats for launching, in order to save the poor wretches whose forms thickly dotted the water.

Paul Essex was among the coolest of the Great Western's passengers. He had, fortunately, been standing astern at the moment of the explosion, and thus escaped the perils of the whistling steam and hurtling iron. He did his utmost to quiet the shrieking women beside him.

"Keep cool," he cried, "and you will be safe. The other boat will be here to your rescue in a few minutes.—Are there no life-preservers on the boat?"

This question was addressed to one of the deck hands, who answered:

"Yes, plenty of them. But there is no getting at those amidships. There are some in the after-cabin, but the door is choked."

"There are ways of opening it," exclaimed Paul, seizing an ax that hung in slings near him, and running to the companionway.

In a moment the sound of his blows was heard, as they fell in rapid succession on the door, while the noise of splintering and crashing wood told that he was making his way through the obstruction.

The deck-hand seized an ax and ran to his assistance. But there was no approaching Paul, who stood at the bottom of the stairs, flinging the keen ax in rapid circles round his head, and bringing it down with a crashing blow at every circle. The door yielded, bent, gave way before his assault. In a moment more it flew wide open, revealing a cavernous depth, filled with the gushing mist of the steam.

"Hold back!" yelled the deck-hand. "No one can go in there and live!"

"Any one can try," roared back Paul. "Where are the life-preservers?"

"Against the sides of the cabin; just under the roof."

He waited for no more. A quick leap into the mist and he was lost to view. The observers stood spell-bound.

The minutes slowly passed, but Paul failed to re-appear.

"The confounded idiot!" growled the hand. "Didn't I tell him? He's scalded into a boiled mummy by this time."

"Not quite a mummy," came a voice from the mist, and Paul staggered out, with both arms filled with the cork-floats which served as life-preservers.

"It's not so bad as that," he cried, removing the handkerchief which he had tied around his mouth and nostrils. "Plunge in gentlemen, there are more of them there. It is scorching hot, but it is worth a scorch to save a life."

He hurried to the women with the preservers he had obtained, while several others of the men followed his example, ashamed to stand in dread before the danger he had so bravely dared.

Meanwhile the steamer was sinking deeper and deeper in the water, and the lurid gleam had broadened into a sheet of flame, which shot upward through the open hold. It spread rapidly over the inflammable material of the deck, driving back the affrighted passengers as the winds carried the hot flames aft.

Paul had repeated his visit to the cabin, and been followed by others, until most of the women were provided with the cork floats;

while many of the men, with the selfish instinct of self-preservation, had seized upon and sprung overboard with these aids to safety.

"Here comes the Occident! She is lowering her boats!" cried Paul. "Overboard with you all! The fire will be on us in a minute, and the water is safer than the deck!"

He leaped from the stern as he spoke, and sunk deep into the cold water that swirled in swift eddies past the sinking and burning boat.

In his generous magnanimity he had given all the life-preservers which he had risked his own life to gain to the helpless women, and had only his own arms to trust to for safety.

But he was an excellent swimmer, and had no doubt of his ability to reach the shore in safety, even if not taken up by one of the boats, which were already putting out from the sides of the approaching Occident.

Yet the water around him was dotted with heads, some of swimmers who combated bravely with the current, others of helpless persons who fought wildly with the deadly element which seemed sucking them into its depths, or clung desperately to their means of support.

It was perilous to remain within reach of the drowning wretches, who grasped wildly at every object which came within their reach. Paul swam straight outward, seeking to escape the perilous circle, and warily avoiding the clutching hands of the despairing and sinking unfortunates.

He struck against a floating form, which an eddy of the stream threw near him. Striking out hastily in the opposite direction, he sought to avoid the expected grasp that might drag him helplessly beneath the fatal waves.

But no such effort came, and he looked curiously toward the floating object.

It was the body of a man. The selfish wretch, in his eagerness to escape, had girded himself with two life-preservers. But they had been put on so unskillfully that they had slipped down to the middle of his body, and he now floated, stone dead, with his head beneath the swirling waters, while his body was borne upward by the cork floats.

"He has been well paid for his selfishness," muttered Paul. "The floats are of no further use to him, while they may save some other poor creature's life. I will take possession of them."

In a minute he had removed the floats, fastening one of them around his own body, while he dragged the other after him in the water.

He continued to swim onward, to avoid the line of floating forms. Just before him was a man who was painfully combating with the waves. One arm appeared to hang helplessly downward, while he made his way slowly onward with the aid of the other.

"Hillo, there!" cried Paul, cheerily. "How goes it, comrade? That's hard lines, to fight the Mississippi with one arm."

"Yes," came the reply, in a broken voice. "I was knocked down on the deck, and have sprained my arm. I'm afraid that I'm marked out as food for fishes. Can't you hail the boats?"

Paul had made a discovery, and a sudden revulsion of feeling passed through him. It was Bob Rockett; it was his foe. He could not mis-

take that voice. Should he save him? His evil genius whispered in his ear at that moment that here was an opportunity for revenge."

But no such thought could rest even for a moment in Paul's ingenuous soul. He swam quickly up.

"Come, come, my poor fellow!" he said, encouragingly. "I have an extra life-preserver. Hold still for a minute. I will fasten it on you."

He deftly wound it around the lame man's breast, and brought it up over his back, fastening the straps across his shoulders so firmly that they could not easily slip.

"There, my boy, you cannot sink now if you try. Keep up your spirits and I will see that a boat takes you up."

"Thank you," came the reply. "To whom do I owe this service?"

He twisted himself around in the water toward Paul, who was beginning to swim away.

"None of that, my hearty!" cried Bob. "I must see your face."

His well arm clutched Paul by the shoulder, and pulled him vigorously around. The two men were face to face.

"Paul Essex!"

"Bob Rockett!"

Once before that day, under very different circumstances, had those two men met; and those names had been spoken in very different tones.

A strange expression passed over Bob's face. His features assumed an unwonted softness.

"Did you know to whom you were giving that life-preserver?" he asked.

"Never mind that," replied Paul curtly. "You have got it. Make the most of it. And let go my shoulder."

"Did you know me?" roared Bob, with a tone of fury. "Answer me, or by heavens, I'll find other means to wring an answer from you!"

"And if I will not answer to such a tone as that?"

"I must know. I will not let you go till you tell me."

There was a different ring in Bob's voice, a softer light in his eye.

Paul looked at him for a moment in silence, and then said:

"Yes. I knew you."

"Very well, Paul Essex," and Bob loosed his hold. "You can swim on. But don't fancy that I will forget that I owe my life to you. That more than wipes out all the old score between us."

Paul swam on in silence, leaving his old foe to float onward, upborne by the life-saving float.

Meanwhile, on board the Occident, all was pity, excitement, and confusion. The boats were bringing in numbers of men and women who had been snatched from the devouring waves, and who were hastily transferred to the friendly deck, while the boats shoved off again on their errand of mercy.

The Great Western was now a volume of flames, which it was not safe to approach, but there were abundance of forms yet afloat on the waves who might be saved from death.

Among the passengers of the Occident were

two who stood back, looking coolly on the busy labors of their companions but taking no active part themselves. They watched curiously as every boat came in with its living freight.

Suddenly they started and retreated hastily toward the cabin.

"It is our Little Rock friend," said one of these, a tall, handsome gentleman.

"Yes. He must not see us," answered his companion, drawing him still further backward.

They had good reason, indeed, to retreat, for the saved passenger was our crippled friend, Bob Rackett, and those persons were George and Marie Delorme, the gamblers who had sought to fleece him, and been so signally defeated in their scheme.

They had, in fact, still stronger reason to retreat, for the next boat brought in Paul Essex. It would have decidedly interfered with their plans had he seen and recognized them, but they were safely ensconced in the cabin before he set foot on the deck of the Occident.

Five minutes more and the wreck of the Great Western sunk with a deep swirl into the dark waters, only her upper deck remaining visible, on which the flames still fastened their devouring tongues.

Over the broad surface of the stream no living form was any longer visible.

CHAPTER V.

BOB PLAYS A LOSING CARD.

THE good steamer Occident glided onward up the great river, leaving far behind the scene of the destruction of her rival. She had lurked about the locality of the wreck until all were saved whom it was possible to wrest from the waters. She then steamed soberly away on her upward journey, leaving the many victims of the suicidal race whelmed beneath the waves, or suffocated, scalded and burnt on the sunken hull of the unfortunate Great Western.

Many of the rescued persons had been injured, and the kind sympathy of their late rivals was enlisted in their aid. Among these was Bob Rackett. His arm had been struck by a flying splinter, and was badly bruised and sprained, though there were no bones broken.

He had, however, met with another misfortune, which troubled him far more than his injured arm. The river, which had been forced to yield him up, had not suffered him to escape scathless. His money had gone to feed the maw of the hungry stream. The pocket-book, which contained nearly all the money he possessed, had disappeared, doubtless washed from his pockets by the uneasy waves.

Bob drew his hat down fiercely over his eyes, plunged his one well hand deeply into his pocket, while the other rested in a sling, and roamed disconsolately from end to end of the long boat, grumbling at the river between his clinched teeth.

There was no part of the steamer that escaped his uneasy wanderings. The Delormes, who had been seeking to avoid him, had not counted upon having to deal with so restless a spirit. Suddenly Bob came face to face with them in the after cabin, to which they had retreated as a safe refuge.

A sarcastic smile came upon the young man's face, as he lifted his eyes and recognized his late antagonists in the game of brag.

He removed his hat, and made a very low bow to the pair of gamblers, who stood with confused faces before him.

"The fair Marie Delorme," he said. "And her handsome cousin, George Anderson. Or is it not her husband, George Delorme? This is, in any case, a highly agreeable meeting. Is there any other game you know, that would make a pleasant pastime?"

George frowned angrily, but Marie burst into her usual merry laugh, and held out her hand in a friendly manner.

"It will not be brag, anyhow," she exclaimed. "There is no sport in trying to outbrag such hands as you hold. Come, come, my dear sir, you must not remember the little joke we tried to get off on you."

"I prefer to remember the little joke I got off on you," replied Bob, with a laugh of sarcasm. "I don't know, though, but I had best have let you clean me out."

"Why so?"

"Because my money would not then have gone to the fishes, and I could have borrowed some of my own cash back from you with a safe conscience."

"Your money all gone!" exclaimed George.

"Washed clean out of me. Not a stiver left."

"That's too bad. We're quits on the game, but I wouldn't mind lending you a hundred or so if it will be of any good to you."

"Ever so much obliged," replied Bob. "But I won't avail myself of your kindness. I am afraid the sort of cash you carry won't pass in my market. Good-day."

Bob turned brusquely on his heel and walked away from the confused confederates.

"Hang him!" growled George. "I would have liked to palm some of that stuff on him; and pay him up for his trick by getting him into trouble."

"Oh! leave him alone," replied Marie. "He is not the kind of metal for us to deal with. On the whole, I rather admire the fellow. The fact is, George, I fear this boat is growing too hot to hold us. It is not that I dread this man. But with young Essex, the new lover of my pretty predecessor in your affections on board, we may get into trouble."

"He would not know me. It is years since he saw me."

Meanwhile Bob walked forward, a dubious look upon his face.

"I ought to hand them over to the authorities," he said to himself. "But, I doubt if a Mississippi steamboat is a safe place to arrest gamblers. Besides, I've a sneaking fancy for that mightily pretty woman. She has such a confoundedly pleasant way about her."

He lost the thread of his musings at this point, for he found himself facing Paul Essex, who stood looking upon him with a stern expression.

"By Jove!" cried Bob, "this is well met. Give me your hand, Paul. Whatever there has been between us in the past may well be let slide now. After your saving my life I can't hold a bitter thought toward you."

"Excuse me," Paul coldly replied, withdrawing his hand. "You didn't save my life, so I owe you nothing but injury."

"By all that's good, I have never done you a harm!"

"Don't say that," was the stern answer. "It is to you I owe my experience of the New York Tombs."

"It is a lie, whoever says so!" Bob hotly rejoined. "I did I like you, I admit that. But I had nothing to do with putting you in prison."

"Who was it, then?" incredulously. "You seem to know."

"And if I do, I know how to hold my tongue. See here, Paul; I have buried the hatchet so far as you are concerned; but I won't agree to sell out old friends. Let bygones be bygones. There is no need to dig up the past."

"There is need enough, then," Paul angrily replied. "I cannot forget nor forgive so easily. It is easy for a plotter to forgive his victim, but not so easy for the victim to forgive the plotter. The fit of a shoe depends very much on what foot it is placed.—And that old story isn't the whole. You tried a new scheme on me to-day by declaring that George Delorme was still alive."

"Well?" asked Bob, sneeringly.

"I have sure proof that he died years ago."

"Your proof is not worth a fig," answered Bob, sturdily. "See here, Paul Essex, I don't want to stand between you and Miss Grace Garland. If she loves you I would do all I could to help on the match, for she is one of my best friends in the world. It is for that reason that I don't want her to commit bigamy."

"It is a lie, and you know it!" cried Paul.

Bob's face darkened. This expression lasted but a moment, however. It was followed by a softer look, as recollection of what he owed to this man returned to him.

"It is a lie, is it?" he exclaimed. "We shall see that! Come with me."

He grasped Paul's arm with a fierce gripe, and drew him forcibly along.

"What do you mean? Where are you dragging me?"

With a vigorous jerk he tore his arm loose from Bob's grasp, and faced him sternly.

They were on the lower deck, where few persons were present.

"I am going to prove that I am not a liar," cried Bob. "George Delorme is at this moment on board the Occident. I will bring you face to face with him. You have not forgotten his looks. You shall see for yourself whether or not Bob Rockett is your enemy."

He started again toward the stern of the boat, followed by Paul, on whose face a look of strange disquiet had come.

They passed the mid-regions of the boat, where the great revolving beam gave motion to the huge wheels of the steamer. Thence they entered the first cabin. This was a long, carpeted saloon, neatly upholstered and furnished.

Beyond this large saloon was a smaller one, the distinctive "Ladies' Cabin." It was here that Bob had met the two persons of whom he was now in search, and he walked directly aft, followed by his uneasy companion.

"We shall see who is the liar," remarked Bob, with some asperity. "You will find your man in there."

Paul hung back for a moment. Could this be true? Were all his proofs false, and was he about to meet the fatal limit to his happiness in this room? He hesitated, his face growing red and pale by turns.

"In there," cried Bob, hoarsely. "And learn if Bob Rockett lies."

Calling up all his resolution Paul stepped forward to the door of the saloon, and looked into the room, his eyelids trembling with an o'er-mastering dread.

A single glance, and then he looked over his shoulder into Bob's triumphant face. The dread on Paul's countenance had been replaced by anger.

"What ridiculous farce is this?" he exclaimed. "Where is George Delorme?"

A look of disquiet came upon Bob's face. He thrust his head through the doorway, and cast his eyes around the room. Only a half-dozen of women were visible, who looked with wondering glances upon the strange manner of these intruders.

"By all that's good, he was there a half-hour ago! He is somewhere on the boat," cried Bob earnestly. "Come with me. I will find him for you."

"There is enough of this child's play," Paul incredulously answered. "I don't intend to be dragged all over the boat, in search of your Will-of-the-wisp."

"Very well. I will find him myself, then. If I bring him before your eyes, you cannot doubt my words."

Yet this was more easily said than done. He searched the boat from end to end, and through its every possible hiding-place for passengers, without a trace of those whom he sought.

A sudden thought came into Bob's mind. He had been so occupied with his own thoughts as to pay no attention to the movements of the boat. One of the deck hands was near him.

"Have we stopped anywhere within the last half hour?" Bob brusquely asked.

"We did. At Clinton. Two miles below."

"Any passengers get off there?"

"Yes. A gentleman and a lady."

"Thank you," said Bob, as he walked disconsolately away. It was very evident what had become of George Delorme.

Meanwhile Paul Essex had grown more fixed in his original opinion than ever.

"You're a shrewd rogue, Bob Rockett," he soliloquized, "but I am not to be cheated by your neat little game. After saving your life you might have had more gratitude than to try such a rascally trick upon me. You could have had no object except to disturb my mind, for it is evident this George Delorme story is all a myth. It is my turn now. I shall keep an eye on you, my friend. I think it my duty to hand you over to the authorities, and telegraph to New York that the absconded thief is caught."

He was reckoning without his host. At that very minute the boat had rounded to at another small station and Bob Rockett stepped ashore, unseen by his enemy,

CHAPTER VI.

A DOWN-EAST HAND AT TEN-PINS.

"YES. I am in your line in the West. On the Chicago force. Took a run East to see how affairs work in the metropolis. York's a big place, and a good school for thief-catchers."

The speaker was a man of middle height, and of a stout figure. He was dressed in a dust-colored suit, of somewhat antiquated cut. A fur cap was drawn well down upon his forehead, almost to his eyes, which were covered with a pair of large spectacles. A thick black beard graced his chin. Altogether there was something novel in his aspect.

The person to whom he spoke fixed his eyes upon him keenly. He replied in a somewhat sarcastic tone:

"I should fancy that Chicago offered opportunities in your line. Why, enough of our New York rogues make tracks in that direction to keep you busy."

"Very true. Very true. You do cut out work for us. I have had several of your jobs in hand myself. Let me see. The last was a job of bank robbery, or something of that sort. A chap they called Bob Rockett. I've had the fellow on my list these six months, but he has not put in an appearance. What's the home news about him? Has he turned up?"

"Not he. His case has been one of my own specials. The coon has not shown his mug on the home circuit. And he'd best not. If he puts in an appearance in these quarters he's my meat, sure."

The stranger looked into the face of the New York detective with a glance of admiration.

"You fellows are wide awake here, that's certain," he remarked. "I've a notion I'd know him at sight myself. I have his description here in my pocket."

He drew a printed slip from his pocket, and commenced to read.

"Small eyes. Full nose, with a slight twist in it. Wide mouth, and teeth in very bad condition.—The fool! why don't he have that fixed by the dentists?" broke in the reader, showing his own perfect teeth in a broad grin. "Beardless chin. Hair of a light brown and worn long. Short, stout figure. Fashionably dressed.—Why a blind man ought to pick him up, from that description."

"That's him, exactly," replied the New York officer. "I wrote that out myself."

"Did you? Well, you're good at it. I hope you'll nab the rogue. Good-day. I want to take a stroll around your city. Will see you again before I vamoose."

He walked away with a sort of stooping, swinging walk. The detective followed him with a sarcastic look.

"Is that the best Chicago can do?" he asked himself. "It must be a one-horse place if that fellow is a fair specimen."

The man in the dust-colored suit and spectacles went swinging away down the street, with an immense show of interest in New York architecture. But as soon as he had turned a corner, and was safely out of sight of the officer with whom he had been conversing, a marked change came over his expression.

He broke out into a laugh of great amuse-

ment, while he twirled his fingers over his shoulders in a very disdainful manner.

"There is nothing like bearding the lion in his den," he said to himself, as he walked slowly onward. "Old Bandy is one of the keenest fellows on the force, yet I hoodwinked him as if he had been a mule. Hang me, if it wasn't a piece of first-class impudence, to read a description of myself face to face with a sharp detective, and complimenting him all the time on his shrewdness. Come, Bob Rockett, I shouldn't wonder if you'd rotate into that business yourself yet? You're cut out for some such line."

He took off his spectacles and carefully wiped them on the skirt of his coat. The loss of these aids to vision made a marked change in his expression. It was plainly Bob Rockett, though his disguise was one not easily penetrated. The change in manner of dressing, the spectacles, the thick beard, gave him the appearance of being at least thirty-five years of age, instead of a beardless young man as he had appeared on leaving New York.

Resuming his spectacles Bob walked on, threading the winding streets of the lower city with the readiness of one born to the situation. He continued his self-conversation as he proceeded.

"There's no mistake about it, but something has to be done. That plunge overboard relieved me of a good two thousand in the neatest style possible. Now, I'm not one of the sort that can live without money. I'm bound to make a stake, or make a hole in the ground trying it.—And I've another object in New York that's worth a little risk. I must stop that marriage by hook or crook. Paul Essex was so confounded headstrong that I may as well give him the go-by. Maybe Miss Grace won't be so hard to manage. I must try her next.—If I could only have touched the track of that cunning bound of a George Delorme! But I left the Occident and tramped back five miles of the worst country road that was ever dug out, only to find that they'd given me the slip. No matter. Two to one that I stumble on them yet."

He was now in a part of New York that was specially familiar to him. He looked anxiously about on the tall buildings that surrounded him. There came to his ear a peculiar, rolling sound, followed by a distinct crash.

"It's Jake Boyd's bowling alley!" he exclaimed. "I haven't tumbled a ball these six months. I'd like considerably to try my muscle."

He plunged into the long cellar, where he found several men engaged in the game of ten-pins, while a number of others were looking on.

These persons looked around at the new-comer, and there was some winking between them as they noticed his rural aspect.

"Say, neighbor," queried Bob, punching one of the bystanders with his thumb. "What sort o' fun d'ye call that? Sw'ar I never see'd nothin' like it down in our settlements."

Bob had certainly talent as a comedian. Any one would have imagined him some down-east farmer, who had never before lost sight of the Green Mountains.

"I don't suppose you have," responded the

person addressed. "It's a new game, invented expressly for the King of Spain. Nobody is allowed to play it in Europe except the royal families. But you know there's no copyright law with this country, so anybody can buckle to it here."

"Laws! you ain't tellin' me that? But what's so cur'us about it? Swan to gracious, if I didn't take a notion it was somethin' furrin at sight, the way it makes them boys walk Spanish."

"Oh, nonsense! I can't tell you all the secrets of it. There's an alley empty. Suppose you and I play a game."

"Oh now! Why I never see'd it afore."

"But it's nothing to learn. You've only got to fling the balls so as to knock down those pins. This gentlemen at the slate will count game for you."

"Lawsee! I ain't no slouch at throwin' balls. Used to be thunderin' sly at town ball, down at our scule-house. Don't cost much I s'pose?"

"Only a trifle of fifty cents a game. We generally put up something more, though, so as to make it interesting."

"Oh! jest to make it interestin'!" and Bob looked so verdantly innocent that the others could hardly help from laughing. "How much, say? I'd like to tell our folks to hum' that I took a hitch at the King of Spain's game."

"It ain't particular how much. Suppose we say ten dollars? Just for interest, you know."

"I don't calkerlate to git beat, I tell you that aforehand. I ain't no slouch on a straight fling."

"That's all right. It's your ten if you win it."

"Pre-cise-ly," drawled Bob. "Put up the cash then, fer I'm a-goin' to have a scrub at that fun or my name's not Dave Drystubble."

He took an old-fashioned purse from his pocket, and deliberately counted out in silver the amount of the bet.

"Guess t'is gentleman kin hold the funds."

He handed the money to the gamekeeper.

"No, no, Mr. Temple here will see that everything goes right. The people of the place, you know, ain't expected to understand that there's any betting going on."

"Neow don't you be playin' that on. I sorter like this young feller's face. Guess he's the chap to buckle on to my money."

As Bob's antagonist had no expectation of losing his cash he made no further objection to the gamekeeper as a stakeholder.

"Dive in, my friend; it's your first throw," remarked the sport. "You've only got to knock down as many of those pins as you can."

"Knock down pins!" cried Bob, with a look of perplexity. "S'pose I goin' to fling them balls at pins? Nary. And whereabouts is the pins?"

"Why at the end of the alley. The wooden pins there."

"Them things? I swan if them ain't high old pins. Here's for 'em, then."

Bob took up one of the balls, spat on his hands, straddled awkwardly across the alley, and gave it a fling that sent it flying over the side of the next alley, and ripping its way down the gutter of the same.

A general laugh followed this first effort of the seeming countryman.

"Hain't got my bearin's yet," averred Bob. coolly. "Jess wait till I break my hand in."

His antagonist took the alley and threw his balls with great carelessness, bringing down a frame with the three balls.

"Lawsee!" cried Bob. "I'm seeing into the thing, now. Jess hold on, boys! I'll show you what's in Down-East muscle!"

He flung the ball in the same awkward manner as before, but with rather more success, as it didn't go beyond the gutter of his own alley.

"Come, come, old chap," cried his antagonist. "You'll have to do better than that, or I'll have a walk over the course."

He scored ten more points.

"Don't you be 'larmed!" exclaimed Bob. "The Drystubbles allers comes in for snacks at the end of the game. I'm a-getting my bearin's."

His ball this time managed to cling to the board sufficiently to take off the corner pin. The second ball veered to the other side and clipped out a pin from there. The third rolled into the gutter!

"By Jove, he's improving," exclaimed one of the lookers-on, with a laugh. "All he wants is to hit between those two balls, and the game's his."

Bob set his teeth in a way that added to the laughter. The game went on until the score stood sixty to ten. It was Bob's turn again. His antagonist, who had been playing with the utmost carelessness, was somewhat astounded to see this ball curve to the center of the board instead of to the gutter. Down went the whole ten pins.

Bob jumped into the air, and clapped his heels together.

"Told ye I only wanted to git my bearin's," he cried. "Got to stir up, youngster, if you calkerlate to wipe out old Vermont."

Down rolled the ball again, and down tumbled the ten pins. The laughter had quite ceased.

"Ye see, town-ball's mighty good practice," laughed Bob. "I knowed I could fetch them sunners. Clean out, boys, and save your toes."

Down went the ten pins again.

Bob's antagonist began to look blue. It was doubtful if he had got bold of such a greenhorn as he fancied. He began to play now with care, but he was no match for Bob Rockett. Frame after frame went down before the unerring balls of the latter, until the game was scored in his favor with thirty points to spare.

"Guess I'll rake in that ten," he cried. "Kinder like the King of Spain's game. Wouldn't mind givin' you a chance at old Down East some other time, if you're agreeable."

Bob walked with a swagger out of the room, leaving the young men who had thought to victimize him, full of astonishment and chagrin.

Bob had not taken many steps, however, before he felt a firm touch upon his shoulder. He turned quickly and cast an angry glance at the man who had stopped him.

But this expression was followed by one of astonishment, and by a startled movement.

"You can't play it on me, Bob," came in firm

tones from the person behind him. "It's shrewdly done, but my eyes ain't easily shut."

"Roger Glindon!" stammered Bob.

"The same. Your old friend, Roger."

"See here, Roger. I thought I was playing it on well. Now, give in; you didn't see through my disguise."

Roger laughed.

"You gave yourself away in another fashion."

"How was that?"

"By your play at ten pins. I was in the saloon and saw it all. Why, if it was in the South Sea Islands, and you were got up as a Hejee chief, I'd know your neat way of handling a ball."

Bob stared and then laughed.

"I'll be hanged if that ain't cute," he cried.

"It's lucky, though, it wasn't you I played that sell on, or I might have been laid out badly, myself."

CHAPTER VII.

WHAT PASSED IN THE GARDEN ON THE HUDSON.

A WEEK or two has passed since the date of our last chapter. The season has now moved forward until it is the middle of the pleasant month of May, and all nature is alive with the beauty and grace of the season of green verdure and bright flowers.

In a beautiful garden attached to Mr. Garland's country seat on the Hudson, walk Paul Essex and Grace Delorme, or Grace Garland, as we have called her elsewhere in these pages.

She is still the same bright, sweet, warm-faced girl as of old. It is true her face has not escaped the touch of the finger of trouble, and is not free from present anxiety, yet it still retains its girlhood beauty, and no one would imagine from her looks the harsh life experience she has gone through.

"I can hardly help being troubled about it, Paul," she said, with a light sigh. "It hangs like a constant nightmare above my head. Of course, I know that I am foolishly apprehensive, after the proofs of George Delorme's death which you have obtained. And yet it seems so strange that young Rockett, after your saving his life, would seek to injure you."

"You don't know that man, Grace. He is a more spiteful fellow than you fancy."

"But who sent the letter that broke off our marriage?"

"Who knows? We have other enemies. Roger Glindon himself may have written it."

She stopped suddenly, while a quick color came to her face. She slowly pulled to pieces a flower which grew beside her.

"It may be," she said at length. "He is capable of any baseness."

"Then why, dear Grace, should our marriage be further postponed? Your father thinks with me that every obstacle is removed. We have waited long. Why must we still wait?"

They had seated themselves on a rustic seat.

"We have waited so long," he repeated.

"And I love you so."

Her eyes swam in liquid light as she turned them upon him. She yielded her slender waist to his clasping arm. Her blushing cheek fell upon his shoulder.

"And I love you, dear Paul," she whispered. "I have been foolishly anxious, I know. But if my father thinks it advisable—"

"He does! he does!" cried Paul triumphantly, pressing his lips to her sweet mouth, in love's warm kiss. "Then you consent? Ah, sweetheart! none were ever so happy as we will be!"

Silence fell between them, the silence of deep consent and perfect trust.

When, an hour later, Paul left that Maytide garden, his step was light and springy, his eyes beaming, his whole aspect instinct with joy and hope.

The light carriage in which he drove toward the railway station passed on the road a person dressed in a dusty-looking suit, who was tramping sturdily along the country road. This person fixed his eyes keenly on Paul, though the latter paid no attention to him in return.

"He looks happy as a king," muttered the pedestrian. "It is too bad to throw a shadow into that Paradise, but they had better have a little trouble now than a great deal hereafter."

Grace still sat on the garden seat where Paul had left her. Her face was supported upon her hand, as she looked dreamily before her at the distant river.

A harsh step crunched on the walk near her. She looked up hastily, and beheld a stranger from whom she shrunk with a sense of fear.

His stout, ungraceful form, his thickly bearded chin, his dusty, uncouth dress, even the huge spectacles he wore, gave him something of a sinister aspect.

"Don't be scared, Miss Grace," came in gentler tones than one would have expected, as the stranger removed his spectacles. "Do you not know me?"

"No. Though there is something familiar now in your face."

He took off his cap, and pushed back the disheveled hair.

She gave a start and an exclamation of surprise.

"Mr. Rockett!" she cried. "Why, what brings you here? Do you not know that you are in danger anywhere in New York?"

"Not much, I fancy," he replied, with a laugh. "I doubt if I will be easily recognized. And if I am, what then? I came here for your sake, Miss Grace, and would be willing to run more risk than that on your account."

She looked at him with uneasy surprise.

"You do not know," he continued, "the conspiracy which has been laid against you. Take my advice. Do not marry Paul Essex. Not now, at least."

"What right have you to assume that I have any thought of marrying?" she replied.

"Because I just saw him, and saw it in his face. And, excuse me, but I saw the same in your face just now."

"You are imagining too much, sir. I do not fancy being spied upon."

"Yet I must tell you that your former husband is living. It is not a month since I saw George Delorme. I have risked the journey here to warn you of this. Paul Essex would not listen to me, because he would rather get you into trouble than give you up as any honest man should."

"Stop, sir! You shall say nothing against him!" she angrily replied. "As for your other tidings, I thank you for your trouble. I am willing to believe that you mean well, but I am satisfied that you are mistaken. There are unquestionable proofs of his death."

"The proofs are worth nothing," returned Bob. "And Paul Essex might have known it, if he had been willing to know it. I know George Delorme's face too well to be mistaken. What is more, he is living with a woman who bears his name. Marie—"

"Marie Ormiston?" she cried suddenly.

"Marie Delorme she calls herself now. I do not know what her old name may have been. A very handsome woman, with full face and lips, dark hair and black eyes. With attractive, winning ways."

She remained silent for a moment, her look full of care and anxiety.

"Excuse me, Mr. Rockett," she said at length. "I will consider what you have told me. But I cannot hear more now. I thank you for your good intentions, although I still think that you must be mistaken."

She turned and walked toward the house with a heavy, almost reeling step.

Bob followed her with pitying eyes.

"It is a rascally shame," he said to himself. "I would knock my head against the wall for a meddling rogue if what I have said was not the truth. But a little trouble now may save a great deal in the time to come. I fancy that marriage is at an end for the present. If Paul Essex is anxious to marry he had best take some means to put George Delorme out of the way."

Bob made his way slowly to the wall of the garden, leaving the place deserted as he leaped over into the road.

CHAPTER VIII.

SHALL IT BE HONESTY OR CRIME?

TWO men sat over a chop and a glass of ale in the interior of an English eating-house. They had the establishment nearly to themselves, in fact, there being no other customers present, only the attendant, who was stationed like a watch-dog behind the bar.

These single customers were our old friends, Roger Glindon and Bob Rockett. The latter was still in disguise, so far as his dress was concerned, but his face had resumed all its old expression of rugged independence.

"Hang these spectacles," he said, taking them from his face, and flinging them roughly on the table. "Only that my grandmother wouldn't know me with them on I'd be clear of wearing such rascally uncomfortable make-believes. So you tell me that you have managed to beggar yourself. Blame me if I can hardly swallow that. How did you manage it?"

"Dabbling in wheat," replied Roger, in his usual impassive manner. "You can't imagine what wonderful capabilities there are in wheat, my boy. I know, for I've been there and found out."

He took a sip from his glass of ale, and settled himself back easily in his chair.

"In wheat?" queried Bob, surprised. "I don't understand you. You haven't tried your

hand at gentleman farming, or any expensive amusement of that sort?"

"Not exactly. My case is a little like what the French call 'farming the revenues.' I've been at it on the street, my lad. Investigating the bucket-shops. Trying to toss the bear. Got well squeezed for my pains."

"I'll be shot if I understand you!" growled Bob. "What's all this palaver about?"

"Good luck take you! I thought you was a man of more education. I've been speculating in wheat, that's the long and short of it. I went in deep, and the bottom fell out, and I dropped through. If you don't know what that means, just go down to Wall street, buy a few cargoes of wheat on a margin, and wait for a rise to float you into fortune. You'll be likely to find out some of the mysteries of puts and calls as I've found out."

He slapped his pocket with his open palm, while a dry smile came upon his face.

"What, fleeced? Cleaned out?" asked Bob.

"You bet! Something rotten in Chicago. I don't pretend to understand it. All I know is that I came out as clean shorn as a sheep that's been through the shearing."

Bob laughed and emptied his glass.

"We are in the same boat," he remarked. "It was the Mississippi River that cleaned me out. It hardly left me enough to pay my way east."

Roger cut a slice of the chop and put a morsel in his mouth, which he chewed in a reflective fashion. He seemed to be turning over some idea in his mind.

"Tell you what it is, Bob," he suddenly broke out. "I can't live without money. I'm too proud to work for it. But I must have money by hook or crook."

"I'm not a bit too proud to work for it," replied Bob, "if any work offered that I was fit for."

"The fiends take your prosy way of digggin up money by hard work! There are neater and quicker ways of getting cash than that."

"Of course. A fellow might set up a faro-bank. Or he might play the innocent, and ring in bets on ten-pins," laughed Bob.

"Too slow, Bob. And not respectable. I've got a better idea."

"Aha! Is it workable?"

"Yes. I think so, at least. See here, my boy, you've been brought up in a rough way, and I don't fancy that you're troubled by any inconvenient twaddle about honesty. For my part there's been a good show of moral lessons wasted on me. But it's all stuff. They won't hold water. I want money, that's the prime consideration. Hang honesty, when a chap's got an empty pocket."

Bob looked at him dubiously. What was all this preamble leading to?

"Come, my lad, you're not doing justice to your glass," continued Roger. "Empty it, and let us fill up again."

"What in the blazes has that to do with it?" cried Bob, angrily, knocking the empty glass on the floor, where it fell in a tinkle of ringing fragments. "I'm tired of this beating around the bush. Out with it. What's in the wind?"

Roger looked cautiously around him. The

saloon continued empty. The distant attendant was out of hearing.

"You know what is meant by cracking a crib, I suppose? Or say breaking a bank? Not by bucking against the tiger, but by crowbars and false keys."

Bob fell back in his chair and gave a shrill whistle of surprise.

"By the Seven Sleepers, but you give a fellow a start!" he exclaimed. "You've shown your hand with a vengeance. But you can't draw it in again; I'm not on that."

"You've got to have money, Bob, and so have I, so don't be so confounded squeamish. See here, I want you in the thing. And it's going to pay you in two ways."

"As how?"

"In cash, and in satisfaction. I calculate you'd enjoy getting a ring in the nose of your old friend, the Provident."

"Hello! Is it at the Provident Bank you are squinting?"

"Just so. And you've got to go in it. You know the lay of the land about there."

Bob mused and hesitated.

"You're not alone in this?"

"No. There are others in it."

"Just take my advice then. Back out of the whole scheme. I've a notion of living an honest life, Roger; I don't owe the Provident any love, that's true. But I'm not on that lay."

"Yes you are. You've got to take a hand in it. Hang it, man, we've the whole thing laid out. It's plain sailing. And a neat twenty thousand or so isn't to be sneezed at."

"I don't care if it's twenty millions," he sturdily asseverated. "Hush, here comes that bartender. I'm mum, but I'm not on it. Take a fool's advice, Roger. Let it drop there."

Roger shook his head. He continued to gaze steadily at Bob with his quiet but meaning look. He appeared to be devising some new plan of attack on Bob's unexpected fortress of honesty.

But he got no opportunity. Bob suddenly sprung to his feet saying:

"Good-day, Roger. I've got other business on the carpet so I must be sliding."

He walked steadily from the room, leaving Roger alone. The latter continued to drum on the table with his fingers for a few minutes, his eyes fixed reflectively on the opposite wall. He then set himself to finish the chop and ale, as coolly as if they had been conversing on the most indifferent subjects.

At a late hour of the same day, another scene took place which had a close connection with the one above described. It was after bank hours, and Mr. Garland, the President of the Provident National Bank, was momentarily expected home, at his town residence on Fifth avenue.

So, at least, the servant informed a young man who called to see him, and who was asked to wait in the library until he should arrive.

Bob Rockett, for it was he, somewhat impatiently paced the floor of this room. He was, in a double respect, bearding the lion in his den, for he made no effort at disguise, being dressed in a neat-fitting suit of gray cloth, and having discarded the disfiguring spectacles.

"I'll give him one more chance," he muttered to himself, as he continued his nervous walk. "I want to be honest, that's sure. It's for him to say whether I shall be or not."

At this moment the door opened, and there entered the room a handsome old gentleman, with a very dignified bearing, who looked with an inquiring glance toward his visitor.

"Are you wishing to see me, sir?" he courteously asked. Then, with a start of surprise and an angry flush: "What? Bless me, if this isn't impudence! Robert Rockett? And to dare to beard me in this fashion?"

"It is not impudence," replied Bob, very humbly for him. "I have come, Mr. Garland, to request that you should put me in an honest way of making a living. I am cut of money, and out of work, and I wish to live an honest and respectable life."

"Why did you not think of that before you undertook to rob the bank?" Mr. Garland angrily asked. "It comes rather late now."

"I had nothing to do with robbing the bank. I was belied in that, as in other things."

"We shall see. We shall see." The angry gentleman hastily left the room. "Wait for my return. Or go, if you prefer, while you have the opportunity."

"Does that mean that he is about to send for an officer?" Bob asked himself. "Very well. Let him if he will. It is a question now whether I am to lead a life of honesty or of crime, and the answer depends on him. If an officer enters the question is settled."

Mr. Garland was not many minutes absent. He seemed somewhat surprised on finding Bob still there on his return. The latter person had coolly seated himself, and was negligently turning over the leaves of a book on the table.

"So! You have preferred to remain, then? Very well, I have my duty to perform."

"And I have mine," answered Bob. "I presume you have sent for an officer."

"Exactly. That is just what I have done."

"If you had sent for the whole force, I would not go without my answer. Am I to be an honest man or a rogue? That is a question which depends on you to decide."

Mr. Garland gave an impatient toss of his head.

"What have I to do with your crimes? How can I hinder them?"

"By giving me employment. If not in the bank, then elsewhere. You have plentiful influence, you can readily do me this service."

"In order that you may commit robbery elsewhere? It will not do, Rockett, I cannot trust you."

Bob looked at him with a strange expression. He had evidently played his cards to win an honest life, and had lost. But one chance yet remained.

"I was safe in the West, and could have made my way there. I returned here to serve you. This is the return I receive for it."

"How to serve me?" in surprise.

"By saving your daughter from crime. I have discovered that her former husband still lives. If she marries as she intends, she will commit bigamy. I have run all this risk for her sake, for I

feel that she is one of the few friends I have in the world."

Mr. Garland looked at him incredulously.

"It won't do, Rockett," he exclaimed. "That is another game you are playing on me. Paul has been West and has discovered that Delorme certainly died."

"Then the wedding will go on?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Then God help poor Miss Grace. That is all I have to say."

He sat a moment with his chin resting on his breast. He was like one who had been defeated at all points, and was ready to give up the fight. Mr. Garland looked at him with growing distrust of his own wisdom.

This moment's silence ended by the opening of the door, and the ushering in of an official-looking person.

"Did you send for me, sir?" he asked, addressing Mr. Garland.

"Yes. This young man is Robert Rockett, who is charged with committing a robbery on the Provident National Bank. Arrest him!"

Bob had risen, and stood supporting himself with one hand on his chair.

The officer approached him.

"Come, young man, you're wanted," he brusquely said.

Bob turned toward the president.

"You have closed the last avenue against me," he sternly remarked. "My life, be it good or bad, rests upon your head. You have shut the door to honesty. I will open the door to crime."

He walked forward, as if to leave the room.

"Come, come, my friend, what does this mean?" cried the officer, striding forward and seizing Bob's arm. "Not so fast."

Bob turned sharply upon him.

"Loose my arm!" he fiercely exclaimed.

"Not till I get you in limbo, my man."

And then came a sudden change in the scene. Bob wheeled sharply around and dashed his clinched hand in the officer's face, knocking him headlong to the floor. The next instant he had vanished, while Mr. Garland stood utterly overwhelmed with surprise.

CHAPTER IX.

OLD FRIENDS TURN UP.

"I AM not exactly afraid of Bob. He's got enough sturdy honesty to not go back on his friends. Still it's mightily important to have him in it, and I can't afford to let him escape so easily."

Roger Glendon tapped his boot with the light riding-whip which he held. A look of indecision marked his face. He sat on a seat in the park, lazily watching the busy play of children on the broad mall.

"When Bob Rockett says no, he generally means no," he cogitated. "Still, some means may be taken to overcome his inconvenient honesty. Let me see— Ah! that may do it! By Jove, it's worth trying, anyhow! I don't know just how open Bob is to the charms of the fair sex, but he must be a perfect anchorite who can withstand that woman. I will make her open the battery of her charms upon him."

Full of this new thought, he rose and hastily

walked toward his riding-horse, which was held by an attendant. Springing into the saddle he rode rapidly toward the Fifth avenue entrance to the Park, and took his course cityward down this magnificent avenue.

"Poor old Rover," he said, patting his horse's neck. "I am afraid you must go next, after my vanished cash, unless I can make this scheme work."

On reaching the busier region of the city, he turned into other streets, and gradually made his way toward regions which might safely have been called disreputable. Halting before a sort of inn on one of these narrow streets, he gave his horse into the charge of a ragged urchin, and walked into the dubious establishment before him. The bar-room was a narrow, dark apartment, with little of the glittering spruceness which usually marks such places.

A few persons sat around the room, rather questionable characters, to judge by their looks. With one arm leaning on the bar stood the proprietor, a fellow half bull-dog, half wolf, to judge by his physiognomy. Roger walked up to this individual, making him a sign, which produced a sudden change in his sulky expression.

"Harry Corson?" said Roger, inquiringly.

The man pointed with his thumb over his shoulder.

"Third story, back," he answered.

"I'll find him then."

He walked back into the house like one well acquainted with its precincts. He quickly made his way to the third story, and gave a peculiar knock at the door of a rear room.

"All correct," came a voice from within, and the door was opened, revealing the bearded face of Bob Rockett.

"Hello, Roger! I had a fancy it was you. Come in."

"A high old hole this. And a regular bull-dog in the mouth of the kennel," growled Roger, with a sniff of disapprobation. "I tried the name and the sign on him, and it opened the game like a charm. Come, Bob, get yourself up for the street. I've got a visit laid out for you."

"What is it?"

"No matter. It's to your interest; that's enough. I want to introduce you to a charming young lady. I know your taste for the fair sex, you dog."

"The deuce you do!" growled Bob, in surprise. "You know more than I do, then. I care no more for them than a cow cares for cucumbers."

"You have not seen this one."

"What in the blazes are you getting through your cranium?"

"You'll know soon enough. Meet me an hour from now at—say Fourth avenue and Twenty-third street. Don't fail."

"All right," grumbled Bob. "Since you're so confounded mysterious about it I suppose I must go it blind. I will be there."

In a few minutes more Roger had regained his horse, and was riding rapidly away.

Bob proceeded slowly to array himself for the street, assuming the disguise he had before worn.

At the time appointed he was at the place fixed upon, where Roger had not yet appeared. He showed himself, however, after a few minutes.

"Ha! my lad," he cried. "I see that the inducement has brought you to time. Come, this way. I wish to make a call on some friends that live near the East River."

He led the way in that direction, Bob following. They stopped at the door of a very modest house, of which Roger rung the bell.

Bob failed to hear the name he asked for, and followed him with growing doubt, as they were ushered into a small parlor.

It was with considerable interest, then, that he heard the door open and saw two persons entering the partly darkened room.

"Good-day," said Roger, cheerfully. "I have taken the liberty to bring my friend, Mr.—"

"Corson," interrupted Bob, pinching Roger's arm.

He had given a violent start on noticing the faces of these persons. There was a sudden movement as if he were withdrawing himself behind his spectacles. He had reason for astonishment. He saw before him no less expected persons than George and Marie Delorme!

"I am pleased to meet you," remarked George Delorme, looking curiously at Bob, who had put on his most unsophisticated expression.

"Dear me! why it is too dark here for anything," exclaimed Marie, as she hastily threw open the shutters of the room, and let in a flood of light.

Roger somewhat anxiously observed Bob. He wished to see what impression this beautiful woman would have upon him, but there was no evidence in Bob's face that he had seen anything in the least degree interesting.

"I am glad to meet your friend," exclaimed Marie, in her cheery way. "Excuse me, but I did not catch the name." Her eyes were fixed with a mixture of wonder and amusement on Bob's very rustic-looking countenance.

He cast a warning glance at Roger.

"Mr. Corson," introduced Roger. "Mr. and Mrs. Delorme."

Several minutes of conversation followed. Then, with a touch on his arm, Marie withdrew Roger from the group, leaving George and Bob engaged in somewhat stumbling talk.

"What sort of a queer bird is this?" she asked, as she pushed Roger into a corner. "And what is your object in bringing us such a specimen of unmitigated greenness?"

"Don't buy him for a greenhorn," was Roger's reply, while he winked in a very knowing manner. "It's his game to play that, but take my word for it that he's as sharp as a razor."

"And who is he? Why do you bring him here?"

"Because I want your help to win him over. He's on the—" he finished the sentence with a peculiarly significant sign.

"What? He?" she looked again at Bob, with a start of surprise.

"Well, not entirely. But we must have him. The thing cannot go on without him, in fact. I have tried my hand on him, and signally failed. I want you to see what you can do with him.

The fellow is susceptible. I could see that he was struck by your face at the start. Try the seductive on him."

A laugh curled her pretty lips.

"Why you might as well set me to make love to a frog; or a philosopher; I don't know which is the worst."

Roger echoed her laugh.

"You don't know him, I see. Try it on in your best fashion. You'll not find him hard to win."

"And for mercy's sake, what shall I do with such a specimen after I have won him?" she asked, with a shrug of her pretty shoulders.

"Polish him up. He's a rough diamond," laughed Roger.

After a few words more he walked forward, and touched George Delorme on the shoulder.

"I wish a few words with you on business," he remarked. "We can leave our fair friend to entertain Mr. Corson. If it will not be too much trouble?"

"No trouble whatever," answered Marie, with her most seductive smile. "I shall be only too happy to try and render myself agreeable to Mr. Corson."

Bob looked at her with an amusing appearance of shyness.

She, inwardly amused, drew her chair up very close to him, but fronting him so that he could not help catching the perilous gleam of her black eyes.

"Are you short-sighted, Mr. Corson? Excuse me for asking. But you are so young a man to wear glasses."

"Why, n-no," answered Bob, with a hesitating stammer. "It's—it's the doctor's order. Bad eyesight."

"Oh my, you don't tell me that? Let me see." She rested a hand on his shoulder, as she looked very closely into his eyes.

Bob blinked, as if he was dazzled.

"How did it ever happen?"

A change came over the expression of Bob's face. He seemed to have suddenly decided upon a new role.

"Got it from looking too close into a pair of black eyes," he replied.

Marie flushed as she drew quickly back. Then her momentary confusion was followed by a silvery laugh. She tapped Bob playfully on the cheek.

"You rogue!" she cried, laying her hand in a thoughtless manner upon his. "So that is your game, then? Playing the sly country bumpkin on us? Ah! I suspected something of the sort from the first."

Bob caught her hand in a warm grasp and blinked closely at her through his spectacles. He had drawn his chair very near to hers.

"You won't mind it, Mrs. Delorme, if I tell you that you're an extraordinarily pretty woman?"

"What do you mean, sir?" she withdrew her hand, with a flushed face.

"Excuse me, but I vow that I can't help it. It isn't every day that one sees such eyes and lips. And such a charming color. Ah!"

Bob gave vent to a sigh that seemed to come from his boots. His arm showed an inclination to glide around her waist.

This was rather too much for Marie's temper; she sprung to her feet, her cheeks blazing with anger.

"Do you wish to insult me, sir?"

"Insult you? By telling you that you are pretty? Why, bless me, if was a girl I'd give my best shoes to be insulted in that fashion. Don't be angry, Mrs. Delorme. I am never left alone with a pretty woman, but I feel an irresistible desire to compliment her. And when one meets such a charming person as you—Ah! that I might but touch my lips to that sweet hand!"

The pretty face was crimsoned. The eyes flashed fire.

"You shall!" she cried, "but not in the fashion you mean!"

In a moment she had dealt him a ringing slap on the mouth with her open hand, and bounced from the room, her whole frame trembling with passion.

"Well got rid of," cried Bob, laughing in great amusement. "The woman was making too desperate an assault on me. She'd have been through my disguise in a minute more if I hadn't turned the tables on her. And as for my sharp friend Roger, I fancy that I've checkmated his game, whatever it is. He must show his hand more plainly if he wants me."

CHAPTER X.

PLOT AND COUNTERPLOT.

THE Provident National Bank was in the full tide of business. The tellers were paying out and receiving money at an incomprehensible rate of speed. The clerks were plunged head and shoulders into the depths of calculations. Customers were coming and going as busily as ants in an ant-hill.

Paul Essex, raised in position with unusual rapidity by the favor of the president, was now actually, though not formally, assistant cashier.

At the hour in which we find ourselves in this scene of active industry, he was closeted with the president in his private room.

Mr. Garland reflectively bit the end of his quill pen as he remarked:

"I would never have dreamed that young Rockett could turn out such an unmitigated scamp. After behaving himself so well for years of bank duty. There is no mistake about it, Paul. Blood will tell."

"I was always doubtful of him," answered Paul. "We were boys together, as you know. There was too much bad blood in him then to be easily got rid of."

"One would think, then, that he might have some sentiment about old times, and not entertain such a spite against you."

"He never liked me," answered Paul. "We fought like young wolves in our youth, and as I happened to be the strongest, Rockett usually got the worst of the battle. I believe he has cherished it against me ever since."

"But after your saving his life? That should, at least, disarm him, even if he is incapable of gratitude."

Paul shook his head doubtfully.

"It is monstrously strange," remarked the president, still biting at his pen. "Grace al-

ways had great influence over him, and was always his friend. Why should he show this spiteful feeling against her? Can it be possible that the fellow is honest in his intentions, and that he really fancies that he has seen Delorme?"

A peculiar smile marked Paul's face.

"I half-believed so once," he replied. "The fellow was so urgent."

"But you do not believe so now?"

"No. I fancy that I understand him better. His action may be entirely consistent with his sentiment toward Grace."

"How so?" in surprise.

"May not that sentiment be more than gratitude? May it not be love?" asked Paul, with a meaning look. "Suppose that her charms have roused such a feeling in his dark soul. Would he not make every effort to prevent her becoming the wife of another?"

"By Jove, Paul!" cried Mr. Garland, springing up. "You have hit the mark, I verily believe. That accounts for the whole business. His manner toward Grace and all. I did feel a shadow of doubt, I acknowledge, but I see through the affair now. There is nothing in the way of your marriage."

"I think not," said Paul, with a modest blush.

"It shall go on then," energetically. "And I hope we may succeed in capturing this rogue in advance. I would like to make you a wedding present of that sort."

"I harbor no enmity against him."

"But I do," cried Mr. Garland. "And, what is more, Paul, from his behavior at that interview I had with him I fancy that he has a design to injure me in some way. I imagine in short, that he is concocting a scheme to rob this bank."

A look of apprehension came upon Paul's face. It was followed by an expression of doubt.

"I don't think we need fear that, sir. It is impossible."

"I am not so sure of that. See here, Paul, I have been thinking of something in connection with this."

"Yes, sir."

"Jones, you know, carries the safe key and the combination."

"Precisely."

"I am none too sure of that man. His face does not impress me favorably. For the present I should prefer to have that key in unquestionable hands."

"It might be well."

"In short, Paul, I wish you to take charge of it."

"Me, sir?"

"Yes."

"But there are Thompson, or Willing. No one can doubt their honesty."

"Certainly not. But I have decided on you. You will take charge of the key and combination for the present."

"Very well, sir, if you desire it. But will you advise Mr. Jones of this change? It might not seem proper to come from so young a man as me."

"All right, my boy," with a smile. "I will attend to that."

Paul left the audience chamber with a mingled look of doubt and exultation upon his features.

At about the same hour that this conversation was taking place, a talk bearing partly on the same subjects, occurred in another part of the city. This was in the modest domicile inhabited by George and Mary Delorme.

She was attired in a neat-fitting morning gown, a crimson sash encircling her slender waist. She leaned back negligently in her chair, her taper fingers playing idly upon the table.

"You think that the marriage will undoubtedly come off?"

"There is no question about it, if I only take care to keep out of sight. Young Essex fancies that he has got sure evidences of my death." He laughed lightly at the thought.

"Heaven grant it may!" she answered with fervor. "For then—"

"What?"

"Oh, nothing. But our relations have been so questionable, George. If I could feel that she no longer had claim on you!"

He laughed again, somewhat brutally, and filiped her fair cheek with his finger.

"Why, you little ninny! I thought you were well past all such nonsense."

"I shall never be past that nonsense, George. I want you for mine, and mine only. That is what love means with me."

Her arm wound softly around his neck. Her eyes looked into his with a deep wealth of affection. He returned her look with a passionate devotion equal to her own.

"At first, you remember, you intended to break off the wedding," she said.

"Exactly. But you were wiser than I. It was your scheme, you rogue, to prepare those proofs of my death for young Essex. There is no doubt that we can bleed old Garland more freely if we let his daughter commit bigamy, than simply to buy me off as an undesirable husband."

"And they are satisfied with the proofs?"

"They could not help being. Why, they have certificates of my death from the mayor, the hospital doctor, and other officials. I took good care, you know, to shift my name to a poor devil who went under with the fever."

"And now, George, I have something else I want to talk with you about." She changed her seat from the chair to his knee. "I want you to give up this bank-robbing scheme. It is too dangerous an undertaking. And why did you ever go into a plot to rob the bank when you had the president already under your thumb? Come, come, my dear; you did not show your usual wisdom in that."

"Glendon made me believe the other scheme had fallen through," he replied. "And I was bound to injure old Garland in any way that offered. It is too late now; I cannot go back."

"You must."

"No, no. It is safe, I tell you. Our plan is too sound a one to fail. Why, Marie, the bank lies at our mercy. There is Jones, who has the key and the combination. He is in with us. Of course we must give him the chance to play

honest by a little decent opposition. But he is ours to the backbone. And then we expect to bring the watchman into the scheme."

She stirred quickly, while her eyes flashed with a fiery light.

"I know what you mean," she angrily cried. "You had that countrified rascal brought here for me to win over! The insulting villain! I am only sorry I did not deal him worse than a blow upon the mouth."

George laughed heartily at her anger. He bent down and kissed her pouting lips.

"There! let that cool your fury, my sweet. Why, the fellow guessed the trick, and was playing right into your hands. But we must have him, Marie. Roger says that he is indispensable. He knows all about the bank. And he is the only one who can approach the watchman. I don't know that you should object to his helping you out in your own effort to win him over."

"Oh! you are a set of fools, all together!" she cried with biting scorn, as she rose and paced the floor. "I should never have undertaken such a task. Why, the fellow was no more susceptible than an oak log. Do you imagine that I didn't see that? He read me through at first sight, and began to fire my own shot back upon me in the coolest style you ever saw. He was laughing in his sleeve all the time."

"I see what is wrong," answered George, smiling. "You have been spoiled by too much sound admiration to put up with the counterfeit article."

"Anyhow, I will have nothing to do with that fellow. You will have to bait some other hook for him."

She left the room with an angry step. George laughed at her unusual spleen. But this merri-ment soon gave way to a more serious look.

"She means it, too," he said to himself. "Roger will have to try some other plan, for the fiends could not move her when she gets in a mood like this."

Roger Glendon was equally troubled about Bob's obstinate disposition.

"I fancied he would melt before that woman like ice before a fire," he said. "Yet in five minutes he succeeded in making her positively furious. Bob must have seen through my game, and played this trick to turn the tables on me."

He was cooling his heels in front of a club room, when who should he see coming along but the veritable Bob, snuff-colored suit, fur cap, spectacles and all.

Roger caught him by the arm, and drew him inside the door.

"In uniform yet?"

"I calculate so. The dogs are getting hotter on my track than ever. You see, I keep the run of the game. I have made the acquaintance of a very keen detective, and have a talk with him every day or two on the subject. He keeps me neatly posted about every step of the hunt for Bob Rockett."

"Well, you are getting to be a coon!" laughed Roger. "But look out. Don't put your head too often in the trap. It may close on you sud-

denly some day. Come in; I want a private talk with you."

He led the way to an unoccupied room in the club-house.

"See here, Bob, you villain," began Roger, "I will not cater for you any more if that is the way you serve me, after my trouble in picking you out such a lovely woman. What devil's humor got into you?"

"Lovely woman be hanged!" growled Bob. "I ain't on that lay."

"You are not quite made of stone, are you?"

"I am not to be tricked, by man or woman. You might have known that, before trying it on. Come, if you want me, show your hand. What's in the wind?"

"You don't need to be told."

"Is it that Provident Bank business?"

"You hit the nail on the head there. Come, my lad, is it yes or no?"

"That's better, anyhow, than setting a woman to draw me on. What work is laid out for me in the scheme?"

Roger looked questioningly into his face.

"I'm your man, Roger," cried Bob. "Old Garland has kicked me out of his books. He can't growl if I fall into yours. Out with it. What is my share of the game?"

"There's two men we need," rejoined Roger, with a look of satisfaction. "I've got one of them safe, your old friend Jones. You can win the other, the night watchman."

"That depends. Is old Colly still on?"

"Yes."

"Then he is mine," exclaimed Bob. "I can handle him. Trust me for that."

"You are in it, then?"

"Body and soul," cried Bob, striking hands with his new confederate.

CHAPTER XI.

NIGHT BUSINESS AT THE PROVIDENT.

DOWN-TOWN in New York was almost deserted, though it was a very early hour in the evening. Eight o'clock had not yet sounded, and yet, on lower Broadway and the business streets in that vicinity, there only remained a shadowy remnant of the throngs which had swarmed there during the day.

At a dark corner on Courtlandt street, just out of Broadway, stood a group of four men. They seemed anxious to avoid observation, and their voices ceased, or sunk into whispering tones at every approach of a footstep. They were dressed in dark clothes, and one of them carried over his shoulder a bag made of some dark material. He let this drop slowly to the ground, with a groan of disaffection.

"It's sinful heavy," he muttered. "There's no use standing here like a post, with a mountain on my shoulders. I'll let the ground carry it awhile."

"Hush!" warned another. "There's some one coming."

A young man approached, and walked past, without even glancing toward them. A neighboring clock rung with the first stroke of eight.

"Ha! There's the hour," exclaimed the last speaker. "Be ready now, lads. Any minute may bring him."

A step sounded from the direction of the river. A man approached, a tall, thin individual. He looked curiously at the group as he passed. One of the men made a movement to follow him. He was stopped by another, who laid a hand on his arm.

"Steady, steady," said this second. "That is not our man. I will give you the signal when to move."

The speaker was a man of middle height, but so broad-shouldered as to make him look shorter than he really was.

"Have you got your barkers ready?" asked a third.

"Barkers be hanged!" exclaimed the stout man. "The man that fires a shot will get a tap from me worth remembering. But what keeps Jack? it is high time he was here."

"Is Jones likely to play any trick on us?"

"No, no. He is safe," answered a tall, well-dressed man, who stood back. "But he has to cover up his track. He is to be a victim, you know. Jack and he both have to play their cards nicely. It is only to see a friend who has been taken suddenly ill. You can't expect the man to hurry up his supper, for that Jones is an old coon. He knows the truth of the wise saw, that 'slow is sure.' Another step down the street. Be ready, lads."

"Isn't it to-night that young Essex is to be married?" asked one of the party.

The broad-shouldered fellow turned hastily toward him, with a look of anger on his face.

"Who in blazes told you that lie?"

"It's true," replied the other, somewhat surprised. "At ten o'clock to-night."

"Hush!" warned the tall man. "Talk about theaters, or the girls, or anything but what you're thinking of. Here he comes."

The stout individual seemed troubled in mind by the information he had just received. He kept morosely silent while the others broke into a loud and desultory conversation. The approaching person turned his eyes carelessly toward them, and then walked on, with a slow, regular step.

The tall man turned.

"How now, Bob?" he whispered.

"It's our man."

"All right. You know the plan, boys."

Roger Glendon, for it was no other than he, started forward, closely followed by the man he had called Bob, and whose other name the reader may readily guess.

The two others walked at some distance behind, the man with the bag partly concealing it under his coat.

The party upon whose track they were following walked steadily onward, with no heed to these two loud-talking men behind him. Reaching the granite-fronted building of the Provident Bank he ascended the steps of that institution, and knocked upon the door.

His pursuers kept well back, in the shadows of the bank steps. The street was deserted at that point, except that a couple of men were passing on the opposite side of the wide avenue.

The bank door opened a crack.

"Is it you, Joe?"

"Ay! ay! Open out, Colly. I suppose you are ready to go home?"

"Ready these two hours," replied the man within.

The sound of a dropping chain was heard. The door opened, admitting the night watchman. A few words passed between the two men, standing just within the open door. They failed to notice that two other men had quietly ascended the bank steps, and stood in the angle of the door.

The day watchman stepped out. His eyes turned inquiringly until they rested upon these two men crouching in the shadows. He laid his hand on the door which the night watchman was about to close.

"One moment, Joe," he remarked. "I forgot to mention. You'll find the—"

The sentence was never finished, for at that instant he was propelled through the open door with such violence as to send his comrade staggering breathlessly backward.

The same instant two sturdy men sprung into the open hall, and two quick blows fell upon the faces of the surprised watchmen, felling them to the floor. It is true that Colly was not hit hard, and fell very easily, but his comrade had too much occupation of his own just then to notice this strange fact.

Almost simultaneous with their fall, a knee was on the breast, a hand at the throat of each, while the other hand pressed a pistol against their temples.

"One word, and it will be the last you ever speak!"

The partly-stunned night watchman looked up in the face of the man who held him. It was masked.

At the same moment two other men entered the partly-opened door, and closed it softly behind them. They, too, were masked.

"Quick! the gags and the darbies here!"

Colly was making a weak pretense of struggling with his captor.

"Be quiet!" cried this man in a savage tone, "or I'll put you past stirring. Here! stop this chap's throat!"

Scarce a minute had elapsed ere both watchmen were gagged and handcuffed. Their captors then forced them to get up, and led them back into the bank. Here they were laid on the marble floor, bound hands and feet, helpless witnesses of what might happen. The affair had been so neatly managed that the night watchman never dreamed of any collusion between his comrade and the burglars.

The four men now gathered in the hall of the bank, out of hearing of the watchmen, for consultation. The front door was closed, but not locked. Its only fastening was a stout chain, which held it from opening beyond a short distance, and which the watchman had used when reconnoitering his companion.

"The first act in the comedy played, and well played," remarked Roger, in his habitually cool tones. "The next depends on our confederate, Jones. We might make our own way into the outer safe, and find some pocket-money there, but the key and the combination will save all that trouble."

"It's too dark here for comfort," growled Bob. "Open the glim, Tony. The door is too tight to let a glint out."

"What time is it?" asked a third, in the voice of George Delorme, as the slide of a dark-lantern was opened, and a stream of light poured across the dark hall.

"Half-past eight," answered Roger, as he held his watch in the light.

"Then where under the sun are our two missing comrades?"

"We must give them a half-hour's grace yet," answered Roger. Let's step back here, gentlemen, and smoke a cigar while we are waiting. There's nothing like keeping cool and taking the world easy. It never pays to get your blood heated."

With a laugh at the coolness of their comrade they took his advice, taking chairs inside the bank railing, and lifting their heels upon the counters which during the day were so thickly strown with cash in every shape. Lighting their cigars, they entered into a desultory conversation upon the opera, the hotels, etc., as carelessly as if they were within the walls of a club-room, instead of inside the counters of a bank which they had come to rob. The bound night-watchman, who was within full hearing of their conversation, was at a loss what to make of their strange behavior. Nor was his comrade, Colly, much better informed. They had both looked for an immediate assault upon the safe.

The man called Tony had remained at the door, in readiness to catch any signal from without. Fifteen minutes had scarcely elapsed before he came hastily back into the bank, accompanied by a slim, tall individual, masked like the rest.

The men within the railing sprung to their feet and dropped their cigars as if they had suddenly burned them.

"Jack? and alone?"

"Yes. You see—"

"Hush!" came a warning from Roger. "There are many ears around here. Where can we get out of earshot of these watchmen?"

"This way," replied Bob.

He led to a door that opened from the rear end of the bank, into a richly upholstered and furnished room.

"It is the Directors' room," he remarked, as he lit the gas. "We will take their part. Hold a private business meeting for the benefit of the bank."

He coolly placed himself in the president's chair, motioning to the others to be seated.

"What does this mean?" cried Roger, too anxious to pay any attention to Bob's pleasantry. "Where is your man, Jack?"

His voice was sharp and stern.

Jack drew a long breath, and looked meaningfully around the circle.

"Dished!" was his only answer.

"How? What is up?"

"Just the infernal bit of bad luck as a party of honest fellows ever had to put up with," growled Jack, bringing his fist down vigorously upon the table. "I don't know whether old Garland smelt a rat or not, but shoot me if he didn't take the key and the combination away from Jones this very morning. There's the devil to pay and no pitch hot; that's all I've got to say about it."

A feeling of consternation went around the circle of masked burglars. Here was a state of affairs not dreamed of in their deepest calculations.

"If the key has been taken from Jones it has been given to some of the other clerks," declared Bob. "Who has it?"

"Paul Essex."

"The blazes!"

A shrill whistle came from Bob's lips. He looked at Roger.

"What was the time fixed for that wedding?"

"Ten o'clock."

"And now?"

"It is just nine."

"Paul may not have left his house yet. Fifteen minutes will take us to the widow Essex's habitation. If we can capture him, carriage and all?"

"Well thought of. It is our only chance," exclaimed Roger, energetically. "You, Bob, myself, and George. Too many cooks would spoil the broth. Leave Tony and Jack here to see that all goes right inside."

"I'm your man!" cried George, springing hastily up.

"For the street, then! We must capture a cab and drive like Jehu to the widow's corner. Come on!"

"And if we succeed he shall give up the combination, if we have to chop him up piecemeal," protested George, savagely, as he followed his comrades in their quick movement to the door.

A hasty observation of the street. The coast was clear. One by one they slipped through the partly open door and down the granite steps into the street.

They vanished into the shadows of the gloomy night.

CHAPTER XII.

AMONG THE WEDDING GUESTS.

AT the magnificent town house of the Garlands, everything was luster and brilliancy. The flash of lights, the rich hues of flowers, the quick coming and going of sheening dresses, flashing jewels and bright faces, gave it the appearance of a fete night.

It was in fact the wedding night of Grace Delorme, the pretty young widow, and the cherished daughter of the rich bank President. Her former attempt at marriage had been signally broken off. Her proud father was determined that it should not be this time, and he defiantly made a parade of the occasion.

"George Delorme will have to walk in here alive and in person, if he wants to claim his bride," exclaimed the haughty old gentleman. "Threatening letters will not answer the purpose. As for Roger Glendon, if he dares show himself, I have given orders that he be put neck and heels out of the door."

"Was it he who brought the threatening letter that broke off the marriage before?" asked the gentleman to whom he was talking.

"Yes. And wrote it, too, confound him! I am satisfied of that. Well, here we are; open to the world; let George Delorme walk in now, or forever keep out of sight."

"You do not imagine that he is alive!" in a tone of surprise.

"No, no!" laughed Mr. Garland. "He is safely under the ground. I must confess, though, that I was a little vexed just now."

"Ah! how was that?"

"I have just received another letter from a professed friend, written in rascally English and abominably spelled. It declares that George Delorme is at this moment in New York, and is holding himself back till the marriage is performed, that he may fleece me afterward."

"And you do not believe it?"

"Not a word of it. I know that I have two unscrupulous enemies here, and both of them in love with my daughter. They would do anything to hinder her marriage. Roger Glendon made the effort before. I fancy that it is Robert Rockett who is making it now."

"But may you not be mistaken, Mr. Garland? May not this warning be true?"

"It is not true!" cried the old man with energy. "I know that George Delorme is dead. I don't ask for any better evidence."

The gentleman to whom he spoke wore a somewhat doubtful expression of countenance. He walked the floor uneasily.

"Where is the bridegroom?" he asked.

"I expect him every minute," replied Mr. Garland. "It was a very proper sentiment with Paul that he wished to pass the last moments before the wedding with his mother, since she was too unwell to be present at the ceremony. He was to be here sharp by half-past nine. It is five minutes past that hour now. But then, clocks do not always agree."

"And young lovers are apt to be a little shy. May it not be some feeling of embarrassment that is keeping him back?"

"Very likely. I was that way once myself. I fancy you, too, have been through the same mill. We have got bravely over all that; but young blood will be foolish yet."

The two old married men laughed jollily together.

At the same time, in another part of the house, this delay in the appearance of the bridegroom was not so philosophically received. In one room a group of wedding guests talked it over rather sarcastically. In another the prettily attired bridesmaids conversed about it anxiously, but in whispers, so as not to disturb the bride, who sat silently by herself. She had, in fact, just withdrawn from the chattering group, as if to indulge in a moment's quiet reflection.

"I hope there's going to be no trouble," whispered one of the anxious girls, a pretty blonde. "But—" and she shrugged her shoulders meaningly. "Were you at the former wedding, Lucy?"

"Why of course I was. Mercy on us, what an affair that was! I never want to be at such another."

"I have my doubts," rejoined the first speaker. "These things go by threes, you know. Now her first marriage was—well, not altogether a success. The second effort was a most decided failure. This is the third. Take my word for it, girls, there's trouble ahead."

"Oh! he will be here. It is only five minutes past the time."

"If I was in love with such a girl as our dear

Grace, I would be five minutes ahead of time instead of behind," ventured a third speaker, a small, bright-faced girl. "He is a cold lover who lets his wedding hour lag."

"Hush!" warned a fourth. "She will hear you."

The face of the bride, however, indicated that she was paying no attention to the chat of her young friends. It was marked by a peculiar doubt and gloom, as if some deep dread was working within her. Her eyes were fixed on the floor, while her little foot traced carelessly the pattern of the carpet.

"Heigh-ho, Grace!" exclaimed the tall blonde, touching her upon the shoulder. "Come, sweet, you are to be married to-day. It is a shame in us to leave you by yourself, and— Excuse me," she whispered in her ear, "but I fear you are troubled, love. I hope it is not—"

"It is nothing," answered Grace, with an effort to smile. "Past events cast their shadows. That is all."

"You are not worrying because Paul is not here?"

"Oh, no!" cheerily. "He will be here. No fear of that. But—I can confide in you?"

"I fancy so," answered the other, with an assuring smile.

"You know these doubts about George De-lorme's death. They trouble me. I cannot help it. What if they should be true; the warnings we have received? Oh, Kate! think of the horror of it!"

She caught her friend's arm, and hid her face on her breast.

The sympathizing friend threw her arms around her, and pressed her lips to her forehead.

"But I thought that you had absolute proof of his death?"

"So it seems! So it seems! It is not the letters that trouble me. But I cannot forget a certain scene in the garden of our country seat, when young Mr. Rockett appeared before me, and assured me that he had lately seen George, alive and well. He seemed to speak the truth. I cannot believe that he would seek to injure me."

"But he may have been mistaken. Years have passed, you know. He was a mere boy then. He might have seen a face that deceived him."

"Boys have often a good memory of faces," rejoined Grace, doubtfully. "I fear—I cannot help fearing, Kate."

The other girls now gathered around, in anxious sympathy. They supposed that the continued absence of Paul was all the trouble.

In an outer room, where the wedding guests were assembled, the same topic of conversation ruled.

"Look at that!" said one sarcastic-looking gentleman, pointing with his thumb to the clock. "Five minutes to ten, and the bridegroom not put in an appearance yet. It begins to look blue."

At this moment Mr. Garland entered the room. There was a slightly haggard look upon his face. But his mouth was closed determinedly.

"Friends!" he said. "You must bear this delay patiently. Something has happened to

Mr. Essex. We shall know in a few minutes. I have sent a dispatch of inquiry."

A silence fell upon the room. Several of the guests grouped sympathizingly around the father. Others gathered in knots about the apartment, with whispered comments on the strange delay.

There was a hurried footstep in the hall. The door opened, and a servant ushered in a wild looking fellow, evidently of Irish extraction. His face was purple with anger.

"And is Mister Garland among ye?" he cried out.

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed the old gentleman, hastening forward. "What is wrong? What brings you here?"

"It's the most owdacious business! An' to think of it's comin' to me. Patrick Riley, as has druv a cab seven years come next June, wid-out iver a—"

"What is the matter?" demanded one of the guests, fiercely grasping his arm. "Has anything happened to Mr. Essex?"

"Sure an' wasn't I hauled off the coach, and tumbled in a corner, wid a bit o' rope round me feet, an' a pistol to me head? An' didn't some footpads run off wid the coach, Mr. Essex and all? Faith I've come here afoot, as fast as me legs would carry me."

The persons present looked at each other significantly. Mr. Garland was the first to speak.

"There was a threat to rob the bank!" he ejaculated, with a hasty, tremulous accent. "Paul had the safe-key and the combination! By heavens, friends, I begin to see through it! They have attacked the bank, and carried him off to force him to open the safe."

A moment's silence of consternation followed.

"We must act at once," cried the sarcastic-looking individual, whose face had suddenly become earnest and energetic. "Are there carriages at the door?"

"Yes. Several of them."

"Then, to the bank! To the bank! Arm yourselves, for we may have a fight before us. To the bank!"

The cry was repeated by others. Mr. Garland hastily ran from the room. He returned in a minute, with a brace of pistols in his hand, one of which he gave to his energetic friend.

"To the bank!"

There was a hasty flight to the carriages.

CHAPTER XIII.

A KIDNAPPED LOVER.

If we go back a short distance in our story we shall find a carriage standing before the door of Mrs. Essex's modest residence, its driver sitting stolidly upon the box, apparently not caring whether it be five minutes or five hours before his fare appears.

The night is a cloudy one, and just at the corner there is a deficiency of light, there being no street lamp within half a block. The streets are almost deserted. Occasionally a person approaches and walks quickly past. A policeman has just strayed slowly along, and turned into a neighboring avenue.

Some other men are now approaching, one on

the side of the street where the carriage stands, two on the opposite side.

The single person checks his pace on coming near the carriage. He lounges slowly up.

"Good evening, Pat," he remarks, halting, and resting his hand on the carriage shaft. "Got a late fare to-night, eh? Not a theater passenger?"

"At this time o' night!" ejaculated the driver with a sniff of disdain. "It'd be late a-goin' and early a-leavin' I've a notion."

"It's not a funeral, at any rate."

"Mebbe it's 'most as bad," retorted Pat. "Sure a weddin' is sometimes next door to the graveyard."

"A wedding, eh? From that house?"

"I'm a-waitin' for the young gentleman," answered the driver, as if very willing to talk.

"I'm despret afeard he'll be late if he don't be a-stirring. There's a swate Fifth avenue gal a-waitin' anxious for him."

Pat wasted a wink on the darkness of the night, for the man at the shaft could certainly not see it.

A person was passing at this moment. A few indifferent remarks passed between the two talkers. The steps of the passer were lost in the distance.

"I bet you a crown, Pat, you don't drive your fare to the wedding!"

"Faith, and I'd like to know what's to hinder me."

"This."

The voice was on the other side of him. It was accompanied by a tap on the head with some heavy weapon, that would have knocked him insensible to the ground had he not been held by a firm hand on his shoulder.

The next moment he was roughly dragged from his seat, and pulled down on the street side of the carriage. He was half-stunned by the blow. Two men hustled him hastily across the street and into the opening of a narrow alley opposite.

"For the marcy—" began Pat. But his eloquence was suddenly brought to a stop by the peculiar sensation of a ring of cold iron pressed against his temple.

"Another whimper, and I'll send a bullet through your stupid brain," was the thrilling whisper in his ear. "We're not playing with you, you idiot; bear that in mind."

Pat subsided into silence. Evidently it was not a good time for conversation.

The door of the house opposite opened. A person came out. Pat could hear his steps on the pavement, and a low "good-by" at the door. It was accompanied by a sound like a kiss.

In a moment the carriage door opened.

"You have the direction?" came in a fresh, clear voice.

"Indade I've got that all right."

Pat was half-inclined to fancy it was himself speaking, the voice sounded so like his own.

"Then drive fast. I am late now."

The carriage door slammed. The iron hoofs of the horse rung on the stones of the street. Pat struggled in the hands of his captors, and gave a stifled cry.

It was an unlucky effort for him, for a

heavy blow from the stock of the pistol took him in the temple, felling him like a log to the ground. He lay stunned and insensible.

Meanwhile the carriage was acquiring rapid headway. Paul Essex, for he was its occupant, sat back on the cushioned seat, lost in pleasant thoughts.

Several corners were quickly turned. At one of them the work of the single horse was considerably added to, the carriage coming almost to a halt, and two men clinging on behind.

"Stir up there, driver," cried Paul, aroused from his reverie. "We have no time to waste."

"Ay, ay! I'll git you there in good time. Yer honor needn't be afeard of that."

He plied the whip, and the horse darted hastily onward again.

But this was certainly not Fifth avenue. A single glance from the carriage window would have told Paul that. Even the subdued sound of the carriage wheels might have told him that they were running in a street railway-track, and not over the stone pavement of the avenue.

But he was not in a frame of mind to attend to such particulars.

Even the fact that several more corners were turned did not arouse the dreaming lover.

"I hope they will not think I am late," he said to himself, as he shook off these pleasant fancies. "It was hard to tear myself away from my poor, dear mother. But— Ha! what is that?"

His eyes had turned carelessly to the carriage-window, and they fell upon the outlines of a building which gave him a strange start. It was surely the granite pile of the Post-office?

Paul bent hastily from his seat, with his eyes to the windows. Those were not the palatial edifices of Fifth avenue, those massive structures with their walls of fortress-like solidity, their great doorways, and wide windows.

He was too well acquainted with their aspect to be for a moment deceived. It was not into Fifth avenue, but into lower Broadway that the driver had brought him.

The carriage was driving furiously down the latter street. Paul flung open the door of the carriage and angrily hailed the driver.

"Hillo!" he screamed. "Where under the sun are you taking me?"

"Eh?" came back in tones of astonishment.

"Did you sp'ake to me, sir?"

"I think so. Haul up instantly. Are you crazy?"

"It's this horse, I fear. The wild divil's got the bit in his teeth. I doubt he's runnin' away wid me. Jist hold yerself still for a minute and I'll fetch the cr'ater."

The rapid progress of the carriage slowly slackened.

"I'm fatching him now, sir," roared the driver, as the horse slowly came to a halt.

Paul looked out. The street seemed deserted. Was that—yes, there was no doubt of it. The granite steps and pillars of the Provident Bank met his eyes!

He leaped angrily to the pavement.

"You confounded idiot!" he began, in a tone of fierce rage. "Do you know what—"

His speech was suddenly checked. Two strong hands had seized his wrists from behind. A smothering bandage was flung over his head, blinding and half-choking him. Ere he could realize what had happened he was pushed hastily up the steps of the bank and through the door, which opened as if by magic to receive him, and closed as quickly behind him and his captors.

"What luck?"

"The best. We've nabbed our man."

Paul made a vigorous effort to escape. But in vain. He was held in an iron grasp.

"Back this way with him."

Despite his struggles he was forced back into the heart of the bank.

Then the bandage was taken from his eyes. He looked around. A single glance showed him where he was. That long walnut table covered with papers; those stuffed easy-chairs; the familiar red and blue of the walls and carpet. It was the directors' room.

The same quick look showed him more. Around him stood a group of masked men, their cavernous eyes bent upon him, each holding a pistol whose muzzle glared perilously upon the astounded prisoner.

A quick gulp of dismay, a trembling of the lips, a sense of horror in his brain, as he remembered the wedding party waiting for his coming, and realized the object for which he had been thus kidnapped.

"What means this?" he managed to articulate.

"Take a seat, my dear sir," said one of the masked men to him, with exaggerated courtesy.

"We have a little private business with you."

"I prefer to stand."

"We prefer that you be seated."

Paul looked at the grim setting of the mouth and chin of the speaker and quietly seated himself.

"That is clever. We don't want to disturb you, my friend. As it happens to be your wedding-night, you will probably prefer not to be detained. Therefore we will only trouble you to hand over the key and the combination of the bank safe. And the sooner the better, for your intended bride may be getting uneasy about your absence."

This last sentence cut Paul as though they had plunged a knife into his breast. But its taunting tone hardened as well as wounded him. He was, then, in the hands of a gang of bank robbers? The safety of the treasures of the bank depended on him. It was well. They might take his life, but they could not force him to betray his trust.

"To begin with, you will hand over that key," said a second of the robbers, as he held his pistol within an inch of Paul's head.

The young man, who was rapidly regaining his equanimity, looked with a sarcastic smile upon this weapon.

"I see you have pistols, gentlemen," he coolly remarked. "There is no need of taking so much trouble to convince me that you are supplied with an armory of useless weapons."

"Useless!"

"Precisely. Suppose you shoot me, what then? You cannot get the desired combination out of

my dead body. There is no quicker way of defeating your little financial scheme than by using one of those threatening toys. Suppose, then, you give up that part of your game."

The men looked at each other. A laugh broke from the lips of one, as he thrust his pistol into his pocket.

"Devilish cool," he muttered. "Maybe we can find other ways of warming up our fine youngster."

"Another point of some importance is this," continued Paul. "Your enterprise is very laudable, and has been very neatly conducted. You have made one little error, however, in getting hold of the wrong man. I am happy to inform you that I am not the keeper of the key. It is in the care of another of the clerks of the bank."

"Who?" asked the tall man.

"That I decline to tell," with a smile of triumph.

"We might find means of making you tell, if we were as blind as you fancy," was the sneering answer. "But as we happen to know that Harry Jones is the name of the clerk in question you can save yourself that trouble."

Paul started with surprise.

"And as we further know that the key was taken from Jones and given into your care three days ago we concluded not to trouble Jones on this interesting occasion."

Paul's surprise increased. These fellows were not to be easily tricked.

"You are mistaken," he replied, with an effort at coolness. "I have not the key."

"Search him!" came from the lips of the tall man.

Paul sprung to his feet, and seized with a desperate clutch the chair on which he had been seated.

"I will brain the villain that dares come near me!"

But what chance has one unarmed man against five? He struck a fierce blow with the chair at a man who approached him from the front. But he was instantly seized from behind, and despite his struggles a thorough search of his pockets was quickly made.

Paul set his teeth firmly as he felt the fingers of one of the villains close upon the key. But that was in his pocket. The combination was in his mind. They might find it more difficult to search the latter than the former.

"Here it is!" cried one of the searchers, holding up a small, peculiar key.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. You don't want to look at the key. Look in the chap's face for evidence."

Paul bit his lips. He had let his face betray him. The tall man at the head of the table again spoke.

"And now, young man, you will save yourself trouble if you quietly hand over that combination. We are bound to have it, so you may as well pass it over quietly as have it drawn out of you by red-hot pincers."

Paul shuddered at the implacable tone of the speaker. But his resolution was not shaken. He would die rather than betray the bank.

"I will never give you the combination," he sternly uttered.

The tall man looked at him for a minute in silence.

"Heat the irons," he said.

An ominous silence followed. Five, ten, fifteen minutes passed. Three of the robbers still surrounded him in grim silence. Two had gone out into the bank in response to the order of their leader.

At the end of this time the two men returned, bearing with them a small charcoal furnace, heated to a white heat, and with two red-hot irons resting on the flaming coals.

"Seize him," cried the leader. "Off with his shoes and stockings!"

At this dread order Paul sprung from his seat. In an instant one of his assailants was felled to the floor. The maddened young man leaped upon him, wrested the pistol from his belt, and endeavored to rise with it in his hand. But a hard blow on the head flung him, half-stunned, to the floor. Ere he could recover he was firm-pinioned by strong hands, the shoes and stockings were wrested from his feet, and he lay prostrate and helpless on the floor, his bare soles exposed to the white-hot irons, which lay in the fire which one of the men was keeping hot with the wind from a bellows.

"The combination!"

"Never!" cried Paul, determinedly.

"Very well, gentlemen. The irons then."

Paul shuddered as he saw the gleaming iron lifted from the fire and approached to his bare feet.

CHAPTER XIV.

A FATAL BULLET.

AN intense, unbearable pain shot through Paul Essex's frame. At first a faint sensation of heat, which rapidly increased until it became a scorching and terrible torture. His devilish tormentors were bringing the iron inch by inch toward his feet, its fierce heat filling his whole frame with torment.

"The combination?" demanded the cool villain in the chair.

Paul bit his lips in agony, and made a desperate effort to escape from his tormentors. It was in vain. They held him in an iron grasp. His struggles only exhausted his strength.

Nearer and nearer came that dreadful instrument of torture. He could feel the skin of his feet scorching under its terrible influence.

"The combination?"

"Never! I will die first!"

Blood was running from his lips, which he had bitten in the extremity of pain.

"Ah! he continues obdurate. The iron is getting cold, I fear. Try the other."

The whole room was brightly illumined by the gleam of the iron which was now taken from the fire, and brought near to the scorching feet of the unhappy captive. A cry of agony trembled on his lips, but was repressed, only a smothered sigh escaping.

At this signal of distress one of the burglars, a short, stout figure, who had stood for the last few minutes quiet against the neighboring wall, started a step forward. It was but a momentary impulse, however. He immediately resumed his position, though an acute eye might have seen that a storm was raging within him.

The iron came nearer and nearer to the flesh of the writhing victim.

"The combination?" spoke again that cold voice from the chair.

The first thought in Paul's mind was one of desperate resistance. But this thought was instantly followed by another, which shot through his brain like a flash of light.

The wedding hour was past. His absence would be a mystery to the guests, and a distress to the bride and her father. What would they think? Why had Mr. Garland given him the key to the safe? Because he suspected a plot to rob the bank. And now that the keeper of the key had not appeared on such an occasion as his wedding—what would the shrewd bank president naturally imagine?

"They will suspect what has really happened!" he said to himself. "They will haste to my rescue. Will it be too late? I must gain time. I must deceive these wretches."

"The combination?" came again in those unswerving tones.

"Yes! yes!" cried Paul, in a voice of agony. He had no need to counterfeit. "Remove that dreadful iron! I will give you the word!"

The tall man made a sign. The iron was withdrawn from his blistered and agonized feet.

"The combination?"

"It is—it is—the word is—*Plant*." The word seemed forced from his lips by inward torment. "*Plant*. Oh, release me! You know now all that I can tell you!"

Those who held Paul loosened him. He made an effort to rise, but the pain of his scorched feet was too great. He fell again with a groan to the floor.

"Try the word," commanded the leader. "If he is lying to us it will be the worse for him."

Paul shuddered at the deadly malignity of the tone in which these words were spoken.

Three of the burglars left the room, among them the stout man who had seemed so moved by the scene of torture. Two others remained, and, pistol in hand, kept guard over the helpless prisoner.

Out in the banking-room all had been deathly silent. The two watchmen, who lay bound and gagged on the floor, waited through minutes that seemed hours in this dread gloom.

They had heard the quick movements of the burglars. They had seen them hastily enter the bank bringing a blinded captive with them. Then the lights had disappeared, all noises ceased: for long, long minutes they waited in silence for the next scene in this dread drama.

But now a flash of light shot across the room. Footsteps sounded on the marble floor. They heard a peculiar fumbling sound, as if an effort was being made to open the safe.

For some ten minutes it continued, an occasional curse marking the impatience of the burglars.

"By all the fiends, he has lied to us!" cried a clear voice. "Not the first letter of the word works. The devil himself couldn't open the safe with that key and that combination."

"Plant, eh?" growled another. "The cunning hound is setting up a plant on us. Fetch him out here and make him open it himself. If he can't do it, by the blue blazes, we'll scorch his

nose instead of his feet next time. We'll spoil the boy's pretty face for him."

Paul, though every step seemed to be on hot needles, was forced to enter the bank, and commanded, with a pistol at his head, to open the safe.

He knelt down and fumbled at it for some minutes.

"Hurry!" cried the tall ruffian. "We can't spend all night on your motions. If you are playing with us, by the gods you shall be sorry for it!"

"The key does not work right," stammered Paul. "That is the combination that was given me, but it won't work."

"It won't, eh? Maybe we can mend it," came the savage voice. "Stir up the fire there, Joe, and bring me a hot iron here. Let us see if we can't make this key work."

"You shall not make me work it!" cried Paul fiercely, leaping to his feet, and flinging the key with a thud against the opposite wall of the bank. "If you burn me by inches I will not open the safe for you."

"All right, my jolly cove; we shall see.—Go get that key, some one."

Paul was again seized and stretched upon the floor. He struggled with all his strength, but he was like a child in those strong hands. He yelled for help, but his cries fell back baffled from the thick granite walls of the bank. He was helpless in the hands of his captors.

The man who had been sent for the iron now returned. The instrument of torture in his hand was at a white heat.

"We will see if he cannot remember the word better, lads," said the leader. "Put the iron to his pretty, blooming cheeks. By Heavens! we will make him an object that his waiting bride won't recognize if he continues obstinate. But there's no use to waste time. Hold it to his eyes. Blind the determined fool!"

"No, no!" cried Paul, in terror.

"You don't know who you are dealing with, boy. We are not children for you to play with. Hold it to his eyes."

The merciless wretch who held the iron was on the point of doing so, when the stout man, who had appeared to restrain himself with difficulty, sprung forward and caught his arm.

"By the Lord, you shall not! I will not stand by and see it!"

"The fiends you won't!" yelled the leader furiously, as he leaped over Paul's body and caught this interfering person by the arm. "Hang your soft heart; do you think you can come in now and spoil our game?"

"You shall not, I say!" persisted the other, as he tore his arm loose. "You may scorch the fool, but you shall not blind him while I stand by!"

"Why, you meddling hound—"

The sentence was never finished. At that instant there came a furious surge upon the front door of the bank. It was followed by a fierce rattling of the iron valves, and by a hubbub of loud voices.

The robbers looked at each other with startled eyes. The two who held Paul sprung hastily to their feet. They who had seemed on the point of a desperate struggle drew back from each

other. He who held the iron let it fall with a ringing sound upon the marble floor.

The blows and cries continued. The door had not been locked, and was only held by the chain. It was a question how long this would stand such a furious assault.

"Perdition! we are lost!" cried the tall villain. "The alarm has been given. There will be a mob at the door in five minutes. Let us break for freedom, and fight our way through."

"No, no!" cried the stout man. "Follow me. There is a rear entrance. We can escape that way while they are working at the front."

Paul had sprung to his feet, heedless of the pain of his wounds.

"Help! help!" he screamed. "Break in the door! To the rear! To the rear! They are escaping!"

"Devil burst your infernal throat!" yelled the tall villain. "Take that for a remembrance!"

He seized the fallen iron and flung it at Paul with all the force of his strong right arm.

But it found a different quarry from the one intended. Paul stooped and evaded the blow, but his stout defender, who stood immediately behind him, received it with all its force upon his forehead. He went down like an ox before the ax of the butcher.

"Ha! by all that's holy, Bob is done for!" came the loud cry. "Dead as a door nail!" as he lifted the arm of the prostrate man and let it fall again with a heavy thud. "Snatch him, boys! It will never do to leave the body here! Shoulder the poor devil, or all that's left of him. We will put him where the cops will never find him, if they wear out their souls in trying."

Two of the burglars obeyed this energetic order. In a moment the lifeless form was raised upon their broad shoulders, and they were in full flight for the rear door of the bank, as rapidly at least as they could move with their heavy burden.

The noise in front increased. With a cry of rage, Paul sprung upon his tall assailant and grappled with him, snatching a pistol with which his hand came into contact.

The athletic villain in an instant tore himself loose, knocking his youthful assailant to the floor with one sweep of his muscular arm. He followed the others in their flight.

Paul, nervous, desperate, beside himself with rage and pain, rose on his elbow and pointed the pistol which he had captured toward the retreating villains.

"Crack! crack! crack!" shot after shot rung with a thundering echo through the vaulted rooms of the bank.

One of them was followed by a loud cry, and a crashing fall to the floor. Then all became silent, save the increasing uproar from the front. The villains had vanished from the bank.

Heedless of the intense pain in his feet, Paul ran hastily to the iron doors, which yet resisted every effort to force them open.

"Hold!" he cried, "I will loosen the chain. The villains have escaped by the rear door. Some of you hasten around the corner street. You may head them off."

As he spoke, he quickly loosened the chain and flung wide the strong doors.

Mr. Garland was the first to crowd into the opening.

"My dear Paul!" he exclaimed, seizing the young man in his arms. "Safe! safe! We were in time, thank God!"

"Just in time," answered Paul with heartfelt thankfulness. "I fear I could not have withstood them much longer."

"My poor boy! But why do you walk so?"

"They have burnt my feet into blisters," replied Paul.

"Bless us! What have you had to go through with! Here! help me! We must carry this poor fellow back and see what the devils have done to him."

While this conversation had proceeded the others had rushed back into the bank, and swarmed over its every room and passage. Mr. Garland was met with a torrent of information, as he came back into the bank, helping to carry Paul.

"The two watchmen are lying there, bound and gagged!" cried one.

"All is safe. They failed in their efforts," announced a second.

"And one of them has come to grief," exclaimed a third. "He lies on the floor there, masked, but stone dead. A pistol ball has struck him in the heart."

"They had a carriage in waiting. We were just in time to see them drive off."

"Let us see that dead villain," and Mr. Garland followed out into the rear of the room.

An involuntary tremor shook his frame as he gazed on the lifeless form.

"Remove the mask."

Mr. Garland gazed for an instant upon the bloodless face, and then a loud cry came from his lips.

"That face! My God! can it be? It is the man I believed dead! It is George Delorme!"

CHAPTER XV.

WHAT BECAME OF BOB ROCKETT?

PAUL ESSEX lay in delirium for a week. The nervous strain upon him had been too great, and a natural revulsion followed. His feet were badly but not dangerously injured, and the intense pain arising from them helped to keep up the delirious fever in his blood.

Thus the search which went on for the burglars could not be aided by any information from the person most capable of describing them. That Bob Rockett had been engaged in it Mr. Garland felt sure. But to be sure of a thing is not evidence that would be accepted in court; and besides Bob Rockett had disappeared.

The police were wide awake in their search for him. Every imaginable haunt where he could be concealed, all his possible associates, were thoroughly investigated, but in vain.

Several arrests were made of parties suspected by the authorities, but they were all released after a close examination. There was no evidence against them.

It would be difficult to describe the feeling which existed in the Garland mansion. Mr. Garland and his daughter Grace felt as if they

had been walking on very thin ice, with an immeasurable gulf beneath them. After all their positive assurance George Delorme had still been living! If the marriage had taken place as designed, what a terrible misfortune it would have proved.

And, too, Bob Rockett's word was now justified; he had, all the time, been Grace's best friend, and had tried to save her even at the hazard of his own safety.

Poor Bob!

That was the feeling in Grace's heart; one of deepest pity and regret for the wayward young man.

To Grace the postponement of the marriage was an unspeakable relief. On the wedding night she had waited like one with a millstone upon her head, hoping that all would be well, yet her heart filled with an overwhelming fear. She felt like one being dragged to the altar as an unwilling sacrifice to the desires of her father and her lover, and the relief was as if an immense weight had been lifted from her soul.

All her old love for George Delorme was suddenly converted into hatred and scorn. It was true then? He had not died, but had deserted her. He had been waiting until she should be married so as to make her buy his silence. Oh! the despicable wretch! Could she feel for his sudden and terrible death? No, it was a just retribution.

She hovered like an angel of mercy over the couch of her delirious lover, happy that now at least he was hers, and every obstacle removed.

The death of George Delorme was no aid to the police in their search. He was utterly unknown to them in the lists of crime, nor could they trace any of his associates in the city.

It is true that a woman professing to be his wife had made her appearance, and had fallen into a frenzy of grief over the dead body. The cold-natured officers themselves could not look with dry eyes upon the suffering, and listen unmoved to the cries of anguish from this beautiful woman, for her face was one of a remarkable and voluptuous charm.

The body was readily given up to the grieving wife, as she declared herself to be, though many dubious looks passed between the officers as they tried to make this agree with the story that this was the long missing husband of Grace Delorme.

With true business instinct they followed the corpse to the home of the distracted wife, and set a watch upon this habitation, hoping to discover something by investigating the visitors to this house of death and sorrow.

But this effort proved of as little avail as the others. It is true that several former acquaintances of George Delorme called at the house, moved by a natural feeling for one with whom they had once been intimate, despite his recent lapse into crime. Possibly, too, the fame of the remarkable beauty of the sorrowing wife had some influence in determining these visits.

For these people were soon found to be of highly respectable character, it being out of the question that they could have had any connection with the attempted bank robbery.

Among them was Roger Glindon, a person well known to be a fast young man about town, yet

of reputed wealth and good connections, and of course above suspicion.

"Glindon has the name of being a lady-killer," remarked a sarcastic officer. "I fancy he is much more anxious to wipe away the tears of the pretty wife, than to grieve over the dead husband."

Nor did their idea seem wrong, for Glindon was certainly closeted with the unhappy woman and doing his best to bring her back to what he called a reasonable frame of mind.

"You have your future to think of, Marie," he remarked, drawing his chair close beside hers and looking with sympathy into her moist eyes. "You should not give way so. Poor fellow, I know you feel his loss bitterly. But life must be thought of as well as death."

"Yes, yes! I know! I know!" she replied, hardly restraining herself from sobbing. "But—oh, it is too soon to think of anything so worldly. I loved him with my whole soul, and he has been taken from me."

Her eyes overflowed with tears.

"But grief will not mend it. He is gone. You have the life before you to think of."

"The life before me? What shall that be?" Her eyes flashed through their tears. "This is the first crime, beyond—beyond mere gambling, that poor George ever tried—and see, he must die, while his associates escape. Oh! I could turn on them all! I could betray them all! They have led him to his death!"

"Not me, I hope," answered Roger, coolly. "I did my best to save him. And I have not cowardly deserted him in death."

"That is true," she gratefully replied. "You have been a real friend to me. I shall not forget it. But—but that spectacled villain! If I but knew where to find him! I hate him! I shall make it my business to discover him, and reveal him to the police. I charge *him* with the death of my dear husband!"

"Poor chap, I hardly think he will trouble you or the police any further."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, of course you know that George Delorme was not the only one who got hurt in that business? If poor George stopped a bullet, your friend with the spectacles stopped a hot iron that was quite as bad a thing to get in the way of. Don't ask me where he is, for these are things on which we are sworn to secrecy. I can only say that a coffin entered a certain house on a certain avenue, not many days ago, and that it did not come out empty. I only hope our sharp-eyed police may not find him floating about on the surface; but I have my fears of it," and he shrugged his shoulders significantly.

But the police made no such discovery. If the coffin was given to the waters of East River they never revealed it to the gaze of the Argus-eyed detectives, or to the omnipresent "wharf rats" who prowl along the water front of the great city like night vermin.

In fact, the whole gang of bank robbers appeared to defy the efforts of the police. Not a clew had been left behind them, and every apparent trail failed to lead to any satisfactory termination.

And as we have said, it was impossible to trace the connections of George Delorme. All that

could be found were the associates of his earlier life, and they were all wealthy and respectable men.

It is true that a passing suspicion was felt in regard to Roger Glindon, when the various facts came out that he was a friend to both George Delorme and Bob Rockett, and that he had lately run through his fortune in a life of dissipation, and almost reduced himself to poverty.

But a suspicion with no definite facts to base it upon is not proof that would be acceptable in a court of law, and his evident attention to the pretty widow could be accounted for on other grounds than that of association in crime.

So the attempted burglary continued a mystery.

On the recovery of Paul Essex, the authorities heard the story of the fall of one of the suspected men, and his being carried out of the bank for dead. This explained certain mysterious blood-spots which had been found upon the bank floor, and the officers of the law began to fancy that Bob Rockett had indeed escaped them forever—that the grave had become his safe place of refuge.

"I am sorry enough that it happened so, Grace," said Paul, with much feeling. "There is no doubt that Rockett was the man, and little doubt but that the leader of the gang would have destroyed my eyes but for his interference. It is dreadful to think he has died in my defense, yet no man could have received such a blow and lived."

"It is terrible," replied Grace, with a shudder. "Poor fellow, he had chosen a life of crime, or perhaps been driven to it. But I know that there was good in him. And I hope that his wickedness will be overbalanced by his good. He has done so much for me—for both of us, Paul."

Once more, three months after these events, a wedding party gathered in the Garland mansion, with Paul Essex and Grace Delorme as the happy pair who were made one without further fear of interruption. Only one cloud rested upon the horizon of their young lives—that he who had done so much to save them from misery and crime was not upon the earth to receive their thanks.

"But perhaps it is better as it is," said Paul. "He was but upon the threshold of crime. If he had lived, he might have plunged into its depths."

"I hardly know," she pensively replied. "I must believe that circumstances conspired to drive him into crime. Never have I believed him bad at heart, or irreclaimable. Would that he had lived, for with the light which I now have I see that I might have influenced him for good. Poor Bob!"

Dear Grace! She little guessed that she would be called upon to exert that influence to its utmost.

THE END.

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